

How wisdom helps to live a good a life ¹

Thomas Walenta

There is research published in the German language by psychologists from the famous Berlin Charite Hospital about how to treat mental diseases like depression, bipolar disorder or suicidal thoughts (Kai Baumann, Michael Linden: Weisheitskompetenzen & Weisheitstherapie, Pabst Science Publishers 2008). In their work, they named a set of ten competencies related to and goals of standard therapies in psychology, which they jointly identify as wisdom. Wisdom helps you to be mentally healthy and live a good life.

The ten competencies are not new to the development of human maturity or leadership, and in their book they are combined under the label of wisdom. However, a lack of any one of them can lead to mental weakness, illness and suffering, and problems in life or projects.

This research of Baumann/Linden is also helpful for all of us who are not (yet) diagnosed with mental weakness, because we can use therapies that lead to the ten competencies of wisdom as preventive measures to stabilize and improve our mental health and prevent us from falling sick mentally, which means to be better able to handle all situations that life presents to us. The ability to survive or even strive when we experience disruptions to our lives, is sometimes called resilience (survive) or anti-fragility (strive, term coined by Nassim Nicolas Taleb).

To be very clear: if you experience signs of mental instability or illness, thoughts of depression or burnout, you should contact professional help. Sometimes we do not recognize our weaknesses due to our blind spots. At such times, others can see us better, though they might hesitate to share their observations with us due to their fear of our reaction. What helps in these cases, is to talk with a mentor, a trusted person who is not much involved in our daily lives and can objectively help us to become more self-aware.

Wisdom is the common goal we all strive for in life

Wikipedia defines Wisdom as ‘.. ability to contemplate and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight’ and Baltes, a psychology researcher, said wisdom is ‘.. expert knowledge concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life.’ The keywords are pragmatics and common sense. These describe ways to solve problems in reality, not only in theory.

¹ How to cite this article: Walenta, T. (2023). How wisdom helps to live a good a life, commentary, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue V, May.

Philosophers like Aristotle thought about wisdom too. He defined *phronesis* as a quality for moral understanding, leading to good results and well living. Phronesis means to have the ability to make morally good judgments and decisions.

Other types of human thinking discussed by the old Greeks are *episteme* which includes knowledge and science, and *sophia*, meaning originally skilled, intelligent and clever. Overall, we could say that episteme is concerned with the WHAT, sophia with the HOW (both agnostic to morals, indifferent to good and bad) and phronesis with the WHY.

Indeed, we all appreciate working with a leader or a project manager with high wisdom. And most of us recognize wisdom when we see it, yet there are misconceptions. Wisdom is often seen as a feature of elder and experienced people. But young people can also display wisdom. Acquired knowledge, often mistakenly seen as synonym to wisdom, is in fact but one of the 10 competencies (knowledge about facts, assimilation).



What are the ten competencies that make wisdom?

1. Ability to **change perspectives**

In our often bipolar world, we may be stuck with one view, opinion, mindset, and leadership style. We dig-into it and despise the opposite view with high emotions, which might even lead to hate and violence. The world can be seen as being bipolar (in different dimensions), but there are many more possible views, bipolar mental models are just the most simplistic models of the world.

Even a tri-polar view removes emotions and enables better results, representing the positive power of the number three, or trichotomy. Examples are democratic structures that demand 3 balancing powers (the trias politicas), there is a Christian doctrine of trinity, human decision-making is best guided by heart, head and guts. A three-legged chair has the best stability.

Changing perspectives means the ability to search, find and change viewpoints on a subject. How often are we surprised by new solutions and alternate ways nobody thought of previously. Many examples from human stories tell about this ability and its benefit. For example, the Gordic knot was solved by Alexander the Great by just cutting it with his sword, King Salomon was famous for his solutions that satisfied both opposite opinions, wicked problems require creative solutions.

Changing perspectives is also achieved by reframing, a psychological technique used to see the world thru different windows. This technique is helpful for example for people who had traumata and are stuck in the same thinking again and again.

De Bono's 6 (or 7) hats is a technique where each hat represents another role and perspective and in wearing all 6 hats we can take 6 different perspectives. Related competency concepts are 'cognitive flexibility' and 'mental fluidity'.

The good news is that we can learn to find and change perspectives, and some of the therapies used to treat mental problems are useful. Role plays, acting, visiting people in other countries/from other cultures, exposing yourself to different cultures, and brainstorming are all examples of these therapies. In addition, embracing diversity and tolerating pluralism are symptoms of the competency to change perspectives.

There are no facts, only interpretations (Nietzsche)

2. **Empathy**, ability to connect

Understanding others in their motivations, current state of mind, emotions, and mindsets is a prerequisite to be heard, establishing trust and influencing others. For example, do not try to sell a car to someone who has just lost a loved-one. Techniques like active listening can be learned, they include refraining from sharing your opinion but focus on what is being said by the other. Asking questions about their statements, clarifying, or taking a deeper dive. Analyzing statements along the four-beads model, what does the message convey about content, relationship, self-disclosure and appeal? Looking at the mimic and body language and building rapport thru mirroring, which a technique from NLP.

Empathy can also be experienced without rational analysis; it is feeling with others. Mothers can feel the stitch if their baby is hurt. You start feeling touched if you watch a romantic movie. Or you show emotional signs of relief if a hero survives an unsurmountable challenge.

You focus outside yourself and see the other as a human and become aware of the difference to yourself. Then you connect with the other.

When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen (Hemingway)

3. Awareness & acceptance of **own emotions** (self-awareness)

Being self-aware leads to higher self-confidence and authenticity. It means mindfulness, awareness of your own feelings (while empathy includes awareness of the feelings of others) and is a prerequisite for self-control and emotional balance. There are many exercises to increase our self-awareness, among them living in the present, meditation, and getting feedback about our behaviors from many different people.

Also helpful is being aware of triggers for emotions like fear, anger, hate, shame, or guilt but also positive ones like crying in a movie, loving, or just being joyful. Knowing the triggers and sensing them enables us to ask, 'Do I want to allow this emotion now?'. For negative emotions the answer of our pre-frontal cortex, our rational brain, is mostly 'NO!'. Involving our rational thinking is well achieved through questions and recommended in business and social environments. For example, nobody likes to watch temper tantrums.

Knowing about our habits and in general human biases also makes us more aware of why we judge the way we do. Read about biases and explore how much every one of them influenced your decision-making last week. Charlie Munger, a lifelong friend of Warren Buffet, wrote good summaries about biases and Daniel Kahnemann elaborates on them in his famous book 'Thinking, fast and slow'.

Without awareness there is no improvement.

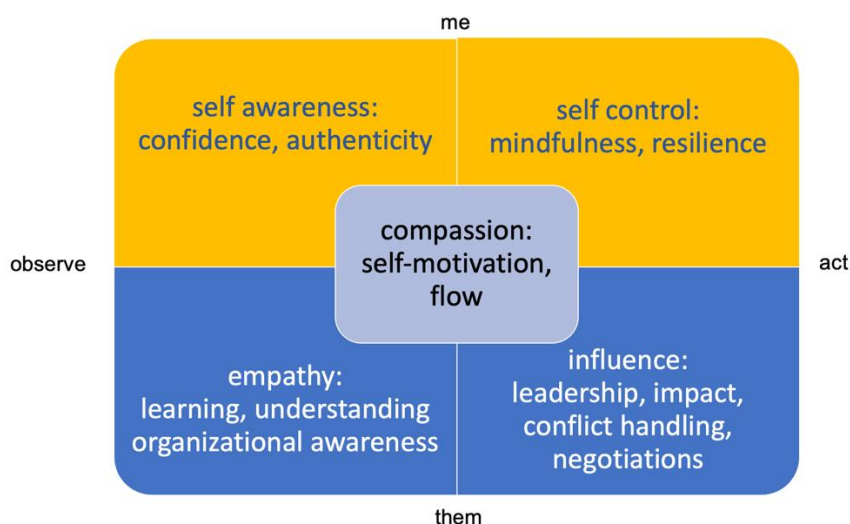
4. Emotional balance, **serenity** (self-control)

Showing patience, being peaceful and avoiding knee-jerk reactions makes you more likable and respected, but also feeds into a peace of mind. Having a mentor helps you develop and finetune this capability. Serenity makes you likable, trustworthy and a source of help for others. Since many disruptions will appear 'controllable' to you, with self-control, you increase your resilience.

While self-awareness is observing yourself, self-control is responding to these observations. It is to become your choice, what you do about an upcoming emotion, if you want to be influenced by others triggering or just nudging you, if you obey biases. Self-control increases your freedom and autonomy.

One tool to increase self-control is to ask yourself questions. Questions can only be processed by our ‘rational brain’, not by our emotional brain or limbic system. So the key is to identify the triggers that – automatically – lead to emotions and if they occur, and if you learned to sense them, ask yourself the question if you now want to have the emotion. Maybe yes, if it is positive, or no, if you understand it could be damaging.

The last three competencies empathy, self-control and self-awareness are parts of **emotional intelligence**, a concept often recommended as a prerequisite of leadership. Although the fourth component of emotional intelligence is often cited as social skills, it can be better characterized as **influence** on others. Influence (or social skills) is not one of the ten wisdom competencies. Influence is a synonym to leadership (if you lead, you influence others to follow you).



Influence or leadership without **ethics**, moral balance, and without judging the consequences, are dangerous and we see many examples of the damage done, in companies, politics and society at large. On the other hand, knowing our moral compass, human values and biases is helped by being self-aware.

The best fighter is never angry (Lao Tzu)

5. Knowledge about facts (**assimilation**) and problem-solving (**accommodation**)

Knowledge is included in wisdom, as one of several competencies of wisdom, and sometimes people confuse knowledge with wisdom.

There are at least two aspects of knowledge as psychologists use it in therapy.

First, we have factual knowledge about a topic, we might be a specialist in a (often technical) topic. This is heuristic knowledge, acquired through our senses and partly stored and condensed in memory. The process of applying it is called assimilation, we apply known schemes to situations.

Second, if we have new situations, or topics, we use accommodation to apply our coping strategies to problems. We use our epistemic intelligence to do this (see the term episteme explained before). To increase epistemic knowledge, we identify patterns, do experiments, and learn from the results (retrospectives, debriefs). Gaming is a good way to develop this competency, when we identify new strategies and sense yet unknown influences.

We can do this risk-free in a kind of sandbox. For me, volunteering is such a sandbox to experiment with leadership behaviors, business topics (creating a legal entity like a Chapter, developing marketing, strategy), which then can inform my problem-solving in real life (the job I am paid for).

There are many books, courses and certifications to learn about problem-solving. The Design Thinking Double Diamond ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Diamond_\(design_process_model\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Diamond_(design_process_model))), PMI's Wicked Problem Solving (WPS), the Kepner Tregoe method (as used in ITIL), and TRIZ (developed by a Russian Genrich Altshuller) are examples of problem-solving concepts. Problems are themselves perspectives, and many problems vanish once we can apply another viewpoint (you certainly remember your GrandPa/Ma showing you another view on a problem you shared with them). Hence it is good to understand the problem before trying to find a solution, yet we tend to jump to solutions.

All of life is problem-solving (Karl Popper).

6. **Contextualism** (consider the situation, timeline, and social relevance)

Though we have mental models and identify patterns in new situations, every situation depends on its unique circumstances, the context at which the situation arises and the social relevance. Hence every project is unique, even if it is similar to a previous one: The same project scope might be implemented differently in different countries or industries or in summer or winter. For example, I have experienced the importance of context when rolling out ERP/SAP templates to several countries in Europe.

Being aware of this and not prematurely selecting a solution that worked in another context but considering the current dependencies of the problem builds this competency.

Context should be analyzed from several perspectives/dimensions. One of them is the timeline, a solution that worked last year, might not work now, even if the environment and stakeholders did not change.

Another dimension of context is the social context, different stakeholders and different roles may result in different politics, networks, communications, dependencies and hence influence the problem and the solution. Different cultures lead to different perceptions and behaviors. Social network diagrams, org-charts, cultural workshops and traditional stakeholder analysis are helpful tools.

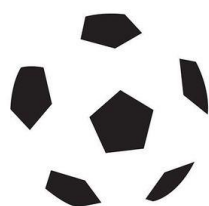
And a third dimension is the factual situation, the interfaces and related components of the problem system may differ significantly, especially now that everyone perceives VUCA and technology advances at high speed. A PESTLE analysis may help to understand that dimension.

There is no silver bullet, and no one size fits all.

7. **Relativism for values**, tolerance for pluralism, diversity

There are many truths (non-monism) and your personal truth is just one of them. Others are entitled to their truths, which are based on the cultures they live in, their beliefs and experiences, and their window to reality. We all see only parts of the full picture and make up a full image in our minds based on our experiences, known patterns and assumptions.

We see 6 black dots on white ground, and if you know football, your mind has completed this input to recognize a football. If not, you probably are lost seeing the image on the left.



Make sense,
complete the
information,
tell yourself a
story



Relativism for values enables you to accept and respect the values of others. Start with learning about other cultures.

Developing the competency of relativism for values is hard if you are part of the same belief systems – sometimes - for most of your life, like nations, churches but also – more temporary - popular political mindsets, often promoted and enshrined by propaganda (think woke-ism, LGBTQ, DEI, ESG).

Tolerance for pluralism can be enhanced by travel, intercultural networking and similar cross-community exposure. Communities differ by their defining beliefs and once you cross from one community to the other you will recognize conflicting beliefs.

How much of this conflict can you tolerate? How much do these conflicts trigger negative emotions in you? Also here, self-awareness and -control help becoming more tolerant.

One of the (many) definitions of pluralism puts it in contrast to mono-ism and dualism and claims that there are in fact many different substances in nature that constitute reality. This tolerance then means that you can live with an undetermined reality, and accept (and not fear) ambiguity and complexity.

I am a citizen, not of Athens, not of Greece, but of the World (Socrates)

8. Orientation towards **sustainability, willpower**, delay instant gratification (perspective of linear and circular time flow)

We can pursue long-term goals and make decisions having in mind short-term and long-term consequences. Long-term orientation (LTO) is one of the dimensions we can observe as differentiators among national cultures (according to Hofstede).

The marshmallow test with young kids sitting in a room alone presented each of them a marshmellow on the table in front of them. The test administrator told them that he would leave the room and come back in 5 minutes, if the marshmellow would still be there, they would get a second one. About 15 years later, it was found that the kids who showed restraint and got the second marshmellow, were statistically significantly more successful in life. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/marshmallow-test.html>

Yes, we like willpower, persistence and restraint, and we support sustainability by words, yet we all make decisions that satisfy our immediate wishes. Think the jojo effect seen with diets.

There indeed are exercises to increase our will power and stamina, many of them establishing new habits and rituals. Meditation, working on your posture, going on a food diet, making promises, and keeping them, measuring your life (presenting progress to yourself, so you are frequently reminded of your goals) are some of them. Military training and martial arts contain willpower exercises. Being mindful, prudent, living in the present and increasing your self-awareness helps.

I'll be back (Arnold Schwarzenegger)

9. Uncertainty tolerance, ability to strategize

Accept that there is no predictability in life. So, swim in life as you swim in a river, responding to currents and waves as they come along. Enjoy the ride.

This competency also eases our acceptance of change, that change is a key part of life, inevitable and we should be able to deal with it. Any project initiation needs uncertainty tolerance, we approach the project thru progressive elaboration, and we only know what we built when we are finished.

The concept of a future and sequential time is a human mental model. In nature, we do observe cyclic models of time instead. Think of day and night, seasons, sleeping and being awake, and fertility cycles. Without thinking about a future, there is no feeling of uncertainty and less fear. Some human groups (e.g. Suaheli) indeed have no word and no mental concept for future. They live in the present (sasa) and, going forward, try to accommodate it to the past (zamani).

In Immanuel Kant's Critique of pure reason (1781), time and space are properties of human cognition – in fact, the two most fundamental categories of human cognition. That means time and space are not real but imagination. They define the way in which our mind experiences, and thinks about, the world. Time, in particular, is “die innere Form der Anschauung”, (the inner form of intuition).

Panta Rhei (everything is in flow, Heraklit)

10. Self-distance, **humility**

Socrates said, I know that I know nothing. Do not think you are the center of the world which will continue once you pass away. Avoid envy, bragging, pride, greed and being a taker, not a giver. Narcissism is a mental illness. Be a giver, not a taker (Adam Grant).

Humility requires controlling our ego and not define ourselves from our past achievements, titles, and awards. Think about it: You like humble people.

There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self. (Hemingway)

The ten competencies that make up wisdom can be achieved thru therapies used by psychologists to treat mental issues, that can be life threatening or at least reduce your quality of life. If we think we are mentally stable and healthy, we still can work on these competencies to prevent potential mental problems but also to become able to master the challenges that life presents to us.

It is quite natural that some competencies seem harder to achieve, and some underlying assumptions (tolerate plurality, get rid of your ego, control emotions are typical common examples) may challenge our current abilities. Becoming aware of this and being open to change are first steps for improvement.

Make a list of the 10 competencies and judge yourself where you stand at each, e.g. on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being complete competent (I would challenge every 10 though). Then ask friends, your mentor, family, team mates, colleagues where they would judge you to be. With that you get a good understanding (self-awareness) about your gaps between self and outer image. Start thinking about the largest gaps first. Maybe talk with your mentor or a psychologist about it to avoid a tunnel view.

Imagine a person who exhibits serenity, is able empathetically to understand how you feel, knows about ways how to look at problems, is humble, does not fear uncertainty, looks at long-term consequences, tolerates the judgements of others, considers the specifics of each situation, can make fun about themselves and always has an alternative to offer. For me, this person looks authentic, trustworthy, helping and caring. A real leader I want to follow and a role model for my own development.

References and further readings

1. Kai Baumann, Michael Linden: Weisheitskompetenzen & Weisheitstherapie, Pabst Science Publishers 2008
2. Daniel Goleman: Emotional Intelligence, Bloomsbury Publishing 2020
3. Nassim Taleb: Antifragility, Random House 2012
4. Hofstede: <https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture>
5. Adam Grant: https://www.ted.com/talks/adam_grant_are_you_a_giver_or_a_taker
6. Problem Solving: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Diamond_\(design_process_model\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Diamond_(design_process_model))
7. PMI WPS: <https://www.pmi.org/wicked-problem-solving>
8. Edward de Bono: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_Thinking_Hats

9. Daniel Kahnemann: Thinking, fast and slow, Penguin Books 2011
 10. Charles T. Munger: The Psychology of Human Misjudgment, for example see <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/summary-psychology-human-misjudgment-charlie-munger-gilad-berenstein/>
-

About the Author



Thomas Walenta, PgMP, PMP

Frankfurt, Germany



Thomas Walenta, PMP, PgMP, PMI Fellow, was working as Project and Program Manager for IBM from 1983-2014. Most recently he was responsible for a program encompassing all business of IBM with a global client in the EMEA region, with teams in India, Japan and across Europe. Thomas build his first PMO in 1995 and started his first program from 2002. He led the PMI Frankfurt Chapter from 1998 to 2005, increasing membership from 111 to 750 and annual budget to 100K Euro. He teaches PM at the University of Applied Sciences Darmstadt and since 2014, he is a project management consultant.

Thomas had a variety of volunteer positions for PMI, among them being final juror of the PMI Project of the Year award, member of the PMI Board nomination committee, auditor for PMI's Registered Education Provider Program, writer/reviewer of PMP Exam questions and significant contributor to PMI's first standards about Program Management and Portfolio Management. Thomas has served as a member of PMI's Ethics Review Committee 2011-2016. He received PMI's Fellow Award in 2012. Thomas is also a member of GPM/IPMA since 1996.

He was elected by PMI membership to serve on the PMI Board of Directors, from 2006 to 2011, and for a second term 2017-2019. Being a speaker on global project management events in Tokyo, Moscow, São Paulo, Little Rock and across Europe, Thomas extended his professional network significantly and is regarded as an experienced and skillful advisor and mentor. He has been an honorary global advisor for the PM World Journal since 2019.

Thomas is based near Frankfurt, Germany and can be contacted at thwalenta@online.de or www.linkedin.com/in/thwalenta/