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**EAST-WEST APPROACHES TO WISDOM:  
THINKING AND PRACTICE IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY**

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## **EAST-WEST APPROACHES TO WISDOM: THINKING AND PRACTICE IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The current paper is used to address a range of issues associated with the concept of the 'pyramid of wisdom' to enable progressive organisations to implement knowledge management systems that capture and apply personal and organisational intellect. A brief examination of what constitutes wisdom in the Western and Eastern traditions is followed by a series of hierarchies associated with a postulated model of the pyramid of wisdom. It is argued that understanding the development of wisdom in an organisation can lead to new approaches to strategic reflection, to alternative notions of leadership and to more holistic and democratic ways of expressing authority. Without understanding of, and practice within, the pyramid of wisdom, the personal and organisational roads to success are likely to be bleak, illusions overpowering and accomplishments short-lived.

*Keywords:* Wisdom; knowledge; pyramid of wisdom; intuition.

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According to Manning (1999: 17) "progressive organizations are moving up the pyramid of wisdom, implementing knowledge-management systems that capture and apply organizational intellect – the organizational memory of *know how* and *know where*". Nevertheless, while one may concur and value that business entities throughout the world are launching new knowledge-management programmes to collect, store, process and distribute their organisational intellect, Manning's bald, un-referenced comment does raise the spectre of what is understood by 'the pyramid of wisdom', or even by 'wisdom'.

The Greek philosopher Zen of Elea is famous for the paradox he espoused in a treatise challenging commonplace notions of space and time. Some 2,500 years later Nadis (1993) describes how Marc Abrahams built a software company around wisdom and how to achieve it. Abrahams uses a series of computer run 'judgement exercises' to deal with the paradox that "a wise person is someone who exercises good judgement.

Good judgement, in turn, comes from experience. The most valuable experience comes from mistakes, which are the result of bad judgement” (Nadis 1993: 8).

Another dilemma is that described by Beck (1999) in the context of a Gamma World adventure game where characters receive varying amounts of intelligence, strength, constitution, dexterity and so on. When Beck asked, “Where is wisdom?” his sons explained that in the post-history Gamma World “wisdom had been replaced by mental strength” (Beck 1999: 8) which was taken to mean the ability to stay sane and focussed even in the midst of crises. Mental toughness may be necessary for survival in a world where wisdom is lacking or disregarded, but what is meant by being wise and how can business organisations cultivate what Kiely and Ellis (1999: 32) describe as “an evolving body of wisdom”?

In an age when recent newspaper headlines (e.g., U.S. faces crisis of capitalism; Is capitalism sick?; America turns on its business heroes) follow revelations of yet more corporate scandals, is it any wonder that writers suggest that “corporate ethics still fall short of decent behaviour” (Eadie 2002: A12) and question the wisdom of leaders in industry!

Korten (2000) reflects on what life’s story reveals of its ancient wisdom and considers how that wisdom might be translated into a practical framework for rethinking and restructuring human societies. His basic lessons about life’s wisdom are:

1. Life favours self-organization.
2. Life is frugal and sharing.
3. Life depends on inclusive, place-based communities.

4. Life rewards cooperation.
5. Life depends on boundaries.
6. Life banks on diversity, creative individuality, and shared learning.

When someone says ‘she’s wise beyond her years’, it is usually understood that wisdom is born of age, experience and learning; that one has learned from life’s wisdom and is able to model the relevant knowledge in skilled judgements and sound personal attributes.

The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner 1989: 421-422) describes a number of meanings for the word:

- 1.a. Capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgement in the choice of means and ends; sometimes, less strictly, sound sense, esp. in practical affairs; opp. to *folly*.
- 2.a. Knowledge (esp. of a high or abstruse kind); enlightenment, learning, erudition; ... Also practical knowledge or understanding, expertness in an art.
- 3.a. Wise discourse or teaching; ... a wise saying or precept.
4. Sanity, ‘reason’.

The word ‘wise’ is described (Simpson & Weiner 1989: 422) as “Manner, mode, fashion, style; *spec.* habitual manner of action, habit, custom”.

A comprehensive approach to understanding wisdom is that of McKee and Barber (1999) who develop an a-priori definition of wisdom that, usefully, can enhance empirical research. Their suggestion is that “wisdom does not lie in *what* one knows,

but in *how* one knows” (McKee & Barber 1999: 151) and that “wisdom requires seeing through illusion” (McKee & Barber 1999: 152). Consequently, they argue that ‘seeing through illusion’ is the only ‘common feature that will unite theoretical and practical wisdom, secular and divine wisdom, the wisdom of age, the wisdom of the psalms, and even the wisdom of such maxims as *waste not, want not*” (McKee & Barber 1999: 153).

Without ruling out the possibility of wisdom in young people, the folk idea that wisdom can come with age (Sternberg 1990a) “expresses the idea that, often, we learn through illusions only by suffering through them” (McKee & Barber 1999: 155). In effect, the argument appears to be that wisdom is multidimensional because seeing through illusion is multidimensional.

In their review of a number of empirical studies, Birren & Fisher (1990: 326) synthesize the empirical findings of traits popularly associated with wisdom and propose the definition: “wisdom is the *integration of the affective, conative, and cognitive aspects* of human abilities in response to life’s tasks and problems. Wisdom is a balance between the opposing valences of intense emotion and detachment, action and inaction, and knowledge and doubts”.

An alternative to this view of wisdom as an attribute of individuals is that of Baltes and Smith (1990) who characterize wisdom as a body of knowledge; “a highly developed body of factual and procedural knowledge and judgement dealing with what we call the *fundamental pragmatics of life*” (Baltes & Smith 1990: 87). They

present three observations or assumptions about their analogue of wisdom as an expert knowledge system;

- i. aspects of knowledge in the domain, fundamental life pragmatics, are within the reach of every individual.
- ii. we expect that very few people become experts.
- iii. our current emphasis is on wisdom as a body or system of knowledge. (Baltes & Smith 1990: 96).

Baltes and Smith (1990: 95) also present a general framework of wisdom as defining characteristics of the mechanics and the pragmatics of intelligence (see Table 1):

**Table 1: Wisdom: A Working Framework:**

*Everyday definition*

Good judgement and advice about important but uncertain matters of life

*Theoretical definition*

An *expert knowledge system* in the domain, fundamental life pragmatics (e.g. life planning, life management, life review).

*Functional consequence:* exceptional insight into human development and life matters, exceptionally good judgement, advice, and commentary about difficult life problems.

*Family of five criteria*

1. *Rich factual knowledge:* general and specific knowledge about the conditions of life and its variations
2. *Rich procedural knowledge:* general and specific knowledge about strategies of judgment and advice concerning matters of life
3. *Life span contextualism:* knowledge about the contexts of life and their temporal (developmental) relationships
4. *Relativism:* knowledge about differences in values, goals, priorities
5. *Uncertainty:* knowledge about the relative indeterminacy and unpredictability of life and ways to manage

Thinking about the prospect of whether the five criteria of Baltes and Smith (1990) could be hierarchical raises again the issue of the 'pyramid of wisdom'; nevertheless, understanding the meaning of wisdom seems to remain an essential starting point.

The work of Haasnoot (2002) suggests that one necessary factor in defining wisdom is that of a 'cultural' context. In business, it often is defined as the accumulation of experience and knowledge applied with good judgement. The phrase 'conventional wisdom' is used "to suggest generally accepted best practices or understandings ... [to] ... reflect the lessons of experience and current knowledge" (Haasnoot 2002: 1). The phrase 'industry wisdom' suggests "a comprehensive, high quality knowledge condition" (Ibid.).

It becomes evident that the term wisdom has been used with a great variety of meanings, and "a survey quickly shows that every culture has or has had its ideal of wisdom and recorded it in oral or written sapiential literature" (Rudolph 1987: 373). So, whereas many Western dictionaries refer to wisdom as 'what is true or right' or 'taught by mystics and sages' without reference to experience or knowledge. Haasnoot (2002: 1) suggests that one can get more help in understanding the word wisdom by consulting Eastern sources because -

"wisdom is to the East what  
technology is to the West".

Eastern sources suggest the following definition –

- \* Wisdom is guidance and understandings received through our intuition.
- \* Wisdom explains the essence of things.
- \* Wisdom is the enlightened use of knowledge, guided by love, to help others.
- \* Wisdom enables us to see the big picture – the wholeness and interconnectedness of life.

Thus, although “attempts to prove the supremacy of Western science over Eastern knowledge or vice versa, though not uncommon, are generally unproductive” (Sheikh & Sheikh 1989: xiv), it appears that the two concepts differ substantially, with only aspects of ‘knowledge’ in common. In the dominant Western view only objective, observable and measurable phenomena are considered real, whereas in the Eastern view human beings reflect spiritual capacities that can be exercised to attain inner freedom. Therefore, because “both systems possess unique strengths” (Sheikh & Sheikh 1989: xv) it would be an advantage if each was fertilized by the other; an activity requiring scholars to immerse themselves in both disciplines.

For example, in a large part it may be that Asian and Western psychologies are complementary; Asian systems focus on advanced stages of development and well-being and Western ones detail psychopathology and early development (Walsh 1989).

When Panchamukhi (2000: 1) writes “India: Ancient wisdom shows the way” or Tao Zhu-gong’s Business Principles are translated into a set of Equivalent Modern Business Principles (Anonymous 2002: 1), the short comings of rational thinking in the West and “telling students ‘*what*’ wisdom is through words” (Takahashi 2000: 226) contrasts starkly with the Eastern disciplines which “instruct ‘*how*’ to gain wisdom” (Takahashi 2000: 226) through experiential media and emotional involvement. Takahashi’s (2000: 227) conclusion is that “in search for a truly inclusive approach to the study of wisdom, the Eastern tradition, by allowing the analytical as well as the synthetic features into the holistic equation, seems to present a more flexible, useful model”.

One difficulty is that there is not *one* Eastern tradition, as can be seen in Jordan's (1998) discussion on non-Western religions; e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism and Zen. However, a selection could be made from the writings of Master K'ung (Billington 1999) who taught that there are five relationships (*wu-lun*) which form the basis of human interaction (*wu-ch'ang*) or constants; the constants being *jen* (loving kindness), *li* (propriety), *i* (fulfilling duty), *chih* (wisdom or insight) and *hsin* (trust).

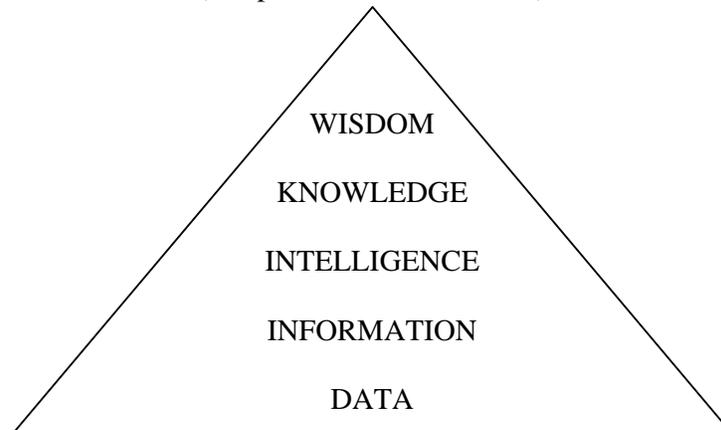
Another difficulty has been identified by Macdonald (1996: 1) who argued that "wisdom is not one thing; it is a whole array of better-than-ordinary ways of being, and living, and dealing with the world". Consequently, individual wise people express wisdom's characteristics in a variety of ways and in different degrees, both within the Eastern and within the Western traditions.

To conclude the examination of the definition of 'wisdom', one could do worse than take Haasnoot's (2002: 2) comment that "when wisdom guides us, we understand wholeness and inter-connectedness in a way that knowledge, analysis and logic can never understand". Thus, in relation to business, the inability to see and understand wholeness is identifiable as a serious cause of many of the problems faced by organisations.

Lien (2002), in an examination of the importance of knowledge management in assisting organizations deal with the choice and wisdom required in this generation to determine tomorrow's world landscape, highlights the value of Tuomi's (1999) presented model of the knowledge hierarchy (see Figure 1). The hierarchy, ranging

from data to information to knowledge to intelligence and culminating in wisdom, appears to be an ideal framework on which to construct a ‘pyramid of wisdom’ relevant to its development in modern organizations.

**Figure 1: The Knowledge Hierarchy**  
(Adapted from Tuomi, 1999)



For present purposes, it is relevant to recognize two aspects to the basic knowledge hierarchy. The first (see Figure 1) is that there is a logical progression of understanding and learning leading to the pinnacle of wisdom; the second is that the order relates to the accumulation and application of mastery in individuals and knowledge management within organisations.

The generally accepted view sees data as simple facts that become information as the data are combined into meaningful constructs that, in turn, become knowledge as the meaningful information is put into a broader context. Knowledge can be applied in intelligent ways and when successful may be regarded as evidence of applied wisdom. Tuomi (1999: 1) presents the more technical view of “the conceptual hierarchy of data, information, and knowledge, showing that data emerge only after one has information and that information emerges only after one already has

knowledge”. An alternative view is that of Stenmark (2002) that “data, information and knowledge are interwoven and interrelated in more complicated ways” than Tuomi (1999) has suggested.

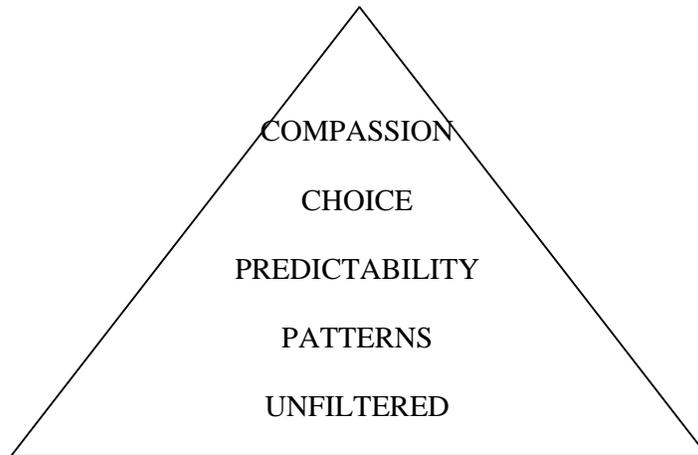
In the light of earlier arguments it may be claimed that the Knowledge Hierarchy integrates the insights of both East and West; with the former emphasising knowledge, intelligence and wisdom and the latter focussing on data, information and knowledge. That is, in general terms, Westerners aim primarily for objective knowledge, whereas Easterners aim to cultivate wisdom.

In the view of Siu (1957: 137) it has been argued that “in these times of insecurity in the wisdom of our intelligentsia, there needs to be a reappraisal of the doctrine of “knowledge for knowledge’s sake”; i.e., knowledge should not be “a floating iceberg of drifting data” (Siu, 1957: 137-8).

Nevertheless, the second part of the conventional view of the knowledge hierarchy (see Figure 2) broadens the conceptual tent by adding explanatory terms to the five aspects. Data are identified as being unfiltered, even isolated facts, and when constructed into patterns that lead to relevant explanation the data become information. When information patterns are clearly identified to the stage of having useful attributes, knowledge can be said to have developed and is associated with a degree of predictability; i.e. the facts exist within a mental structure that consciousness can process for prediction or inference. As the mind uses the knowledge to make choices among alternatives, one moves to the next level of the

hierarchy. Finally, at the top of the hierarchy, values and commitment combine in compassionate behaviour that is indicative of wisdom.

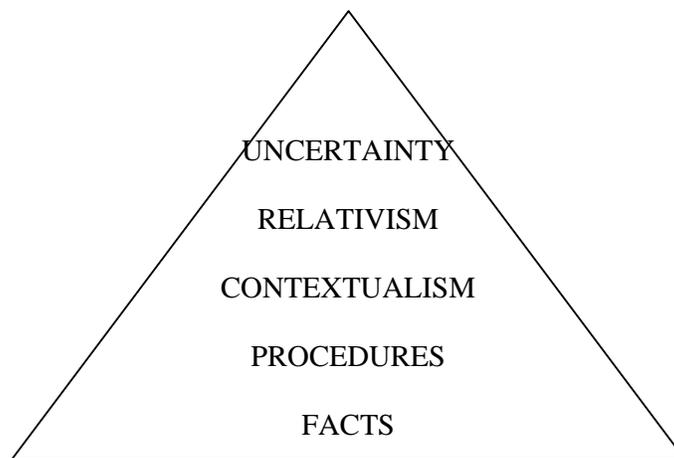
**Figure 2: Application of Knowledge Management**  
(Adapted from Tuomi, 1999)



The delineation of stages in the knowledge hierarchy, and its application, may be linked to the family of five wisdom criteria outlined by Baltes and Smith (1990), as mentioned earlier (see Figure 3). The first level of rich factual knowledge provides facts about individual or organisational life. The second level, procedures, relates to the structuring of those facts and developing strategies to understand the various patterns of life. The third level, contextualism, is specifically described as “knowledge about the contexts of life and their ... relationships” (Baltes & Smith 1990: 95). Relativism aptly describes the intelligence required to understand and choose appropriately from differences between alternatives in goals and priorities. Finally, the term uncertainty highlights the relative indeterminacy and unpredictability of life; wisdom may well be regarded as an essential requisite for enabling achievement of personal or organisational ends.

Another side of the 'pyramid of wisdom' may be derived from the work of Marcic (1997). Her argument is that "the modern organization can be seen as a tree, with roots in the ground and branches reaching out from the trunk and bearing leaves and fruit" (Marcic 1997: 30). The analogy holds up well in many respects; e.g. as in the case of a tree, the parts of an organisation must work together in unity,

**Figure 3: The Family of Five Wisdom Criteria**  
(Adapted from Baltes and Smith, 1990)

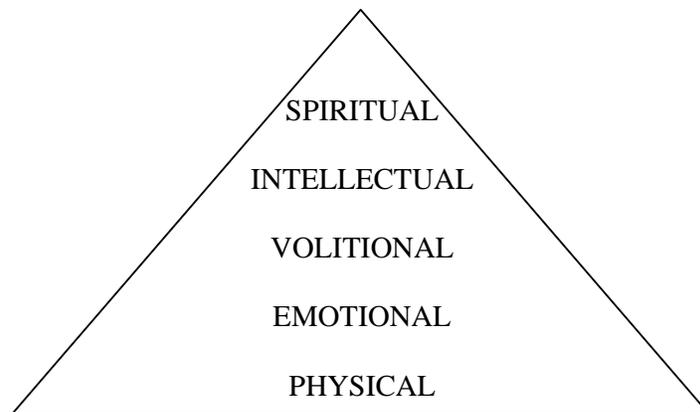


with each segment having a sense of humility and interdependence. Organisations also cannot survive without sensitivity and a sense of service to the environment; i.e., they depend for survival on being part of a symbiotic environment.

Marcic (1997) sets out five dimensions as the fundamentals of love in organisations, and maintains the order of those dimensions when she examines how organisations may make change more effective. Whilst her work-change dimensions replicate the overall managing-with-wisdom model, the primary dimensions can be adapted to the current image of the pyramid (see Figure 4).

The first dimension of work is that of 'physical'; this involves, for example, basic organisational aspects such as the existing work design, working conditions, rewards and company financial well-being. The second level, 'emotional', is a response to the ways in which the physical aspects of the organisation cluster and operate; e.g. supportive working relationships, mutual respect throughout the organisation. The third level is that of 'volitional' where an understanding of the context of organisational change allows one to attend to possibilities of change, resistance to change and self-sacrifice.

**Figure 4: The Dimensions of Work Hierarchy**  
(Adapted from Marcic, 1997)



The fourth level is the 'intellectual' one where choices are exercised in relation to developing more challenging work, training to see a job differently, an emphasis on innovation and creativity in a freedom-to-fail environment. The fifth level is termed 'spiritual' by Marcic (1997) and refers to the exercise of the wisdom of love within moral imperatives such as integrity, respect, justice and the nobility and dignity of all workers.

Another aspect of the hierarchy of thinking and practice in organisations concerns the roles of the leader. Relating to the established knowledge hierarchy (see Figure 1), the first level of leadership is that of ‘acquiring’ relevant data. In a sense this is akin to having a focus strategy whereby data are collected simply because they are the building blocks of further analysis and development. The second level of leadership involves ‘organising’ the data into information patterns that will enable the articulation of the inner status of the organisation’s strengths and weaknesses within its internal environment. The third level of leadership is that of ‘controlling’; i.e., using information to understand the position of the organisation within its external environment. The fourth level of leadership is that of ‘managing’ intelligently the resources and choices of the organisation. The pinnacle of leadership roles is that of ‘leading’ the spiritual welfare of the organisation in a compassionate and wise fashion.

**Figure 5: Leadership Roles and the Wisdom Hierarchy**



Another model that has relevance to the current discussion is that of Stein and Book (2000). Their concept of the five realms of emotional intelligence commence with intrapersonal skills; viz., of self-awareness, actualisation, independence and self-regard. The second level comprises interpersonal skills such as empathy and social

responsibility. The combination of the skills of these two levels leads to a state of adaptability where problem solving and flexibility are evident. However, as one approaches the top of the pyramid, it is necessary to have stress management skills in order to recognise stress, tolerate it and control one's impulses. The fifth level is described as one of general mood that encompasses happiness and optimism.

The penultimate side of the 'pyramid of wisdom', as posited in this paper, is that identifying relevant academic disciplines associated with each level of the knowledge hierarchy. In order to collect and maintain appropriate unfiltered, factual data a sound understanding of database management seems necessary. Systems theory is suggested as a suitable study to enable a more holistic understanding of patterns of information to be addressed. Knowledge management, by assisting in improving predictability, can guide planning and control processes as organisations respond to their contextual

**Figure 6: Realms of Emotional Intelligence**  
(Adapted from Stein and Book, 2000)



environments, and strategic management provides the broad-based skills that lead to intelligent decision-making and managing. Business has been described as “a complex web of human relationships” (Hoffman et al. 2001: 1) and the role of ethics

is at the top of the pyramid because it “requires values-based leadership from top management, purposeful actions that include planning and implementation of standards of appropriate conduct, as well as openness and continuous effort to improve the organization’s ethical performance” (Ferrell et al. 2002: xiii).

Sixty years ago, Maslow (1943) published the first conceptualisation of his theory of human motivation and, in spite of a lack of evidence to support his hierarchy, it enjoys wide acceptance (Soper et al. 1995). Norwood (1999) proposes that Maslow’s hierarchy can be used to show the kinds of information that individual’s seek at

**Figure 7: Academic Disciplines and the Wisdom Hierarchy**

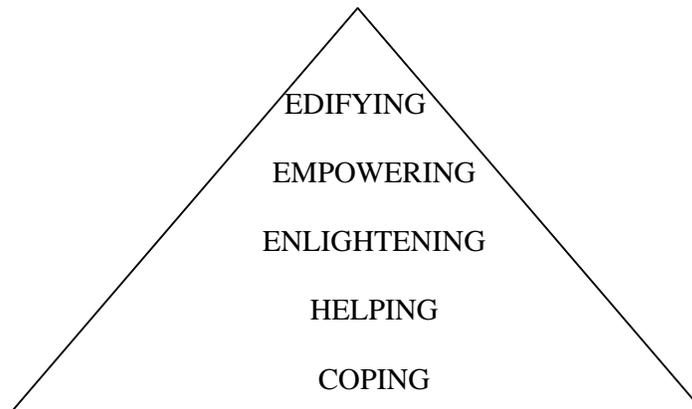


different levels. Although an eight level model of Maslow’s hierarchy has been suggested (Huitt, 2002), Norwood (1999) uses the basic five levels of Maslow: e.g., individuals at the lowest level seek coping information in order to meet their psychological needs and information that is not directly connected to helping a person meet his/her needs in a very short time is ignored; individuals at the safety level seek helping information which assists them to understand how they can be safe and

secure; enlightening information is sought by individuals seeking to satisfy their needs for caring, belonging and relationship; empowering information is that sought by persons who are at the esteem level and looking to have their ego developed; those at the self-actualisation level seek edifying information to address cognitive, aesthetic and transcendence needs.

Having identified at least eight developmental hierarchies, the question becomes one of how knowledge management can exercise the understandings provided by them and connect the various human resources within the organisation. Kurtz (2001) suggests that, in practice, this means running the gamut from identification and mapping of the assets to the position of determining which processes will best enable the flow of relevant knowledge throughout the organisation. The end point is to

**Figure 8: Hierarchy of Individual's Information Seeking Strategies**  
(Adapted from Norwood, 1999)



leverage each level of the hierarchy so that the institution's collective wisdom increases its responsiveness developed through know-how and experience.

Davenport and Prusak (1998) describe a Microsoft project based on a knowledge map and designed to improve the match of employees to jobs so that they will have a better idea of what knowledge is required of them in order to extend products and services for customers. “There are five major stages to the project:

1. Developing a structure of knowledge competency types and levels.
2. Defining the knowledge required for particular jobs.
3. Rating the performance of individual employees in particular jobs by knowledge competencies.
4. Implementing the knowledge competencies in an on-line system.
5. Linking the knowledge model to training programs” (Davenport & Prusak 1998: 75).

In recent times, economic forecasting has been an uncertain exercise that Suutari (2000: 30) describes as having “defied conventional wisdom”. Nevertheless, with profound and continuing change in industrial processes and procedures it is unlikely that a single new conventional wisdom will be developed. What is required within businesses is the ability to develop and to adopt new ways of promoting self-learning and information sharing among employees and with their customers and business partners; i.e. in Lakshmana’s (1999: 1) terms “effective management of an organisation’s knowledge base will be essential for business to adapt and prosper”.

One answer to the challenge is simply to argue, “identifying the place of structured, problem-driven tools is a key to creating integrated information that changes as fast as the opposition” (Newing, 1999: 2). However, although “knowledge management is a powerful technique to transform facts and data learned or obtained by an organisation into meaningful information and ultimately into organisational wisdom” (Brown, 2000: 33), the identified pyramids of wisdom suggest that it is important for leaders to know more about employees, their processes and their cultures if the organisation is to

be successful at integrating new ideas, technology, improving processes and collaboration.

Burdett (1999: 5) outlines leadership inadequacies that result in change initiatives being rejected; “central to these leadership problems are a lack of vision, limited integrity, lack of courage, inappropriate language, limited understanding of true empowerment, and only a passing commitment to leadership as service”.

Perhaps one could take a leaf out of Haapaniemi’s (2001: 9) ‘unconventional wisdom’ paper; his concern is that “knowledge management discussions often involve abstract, esoteric concepts”. The answer postulated in this paper is that an appropriate application of each successive level of the pyramid of wisdom will lead to having people comfortable with doing things very differently simply because they understand what they are doing and are to do! In effect, the “wisdom of exercising change (by judicious manipulation) keeps knowledge alive” (Siu 1957: 89).

By putting together all the demonstrated models, and regenerating the pyramid one level at a time there is the opportunity to have all employees positively participating in organisational change, establishing knowledge sharing systems and a culture which can be a lighthouse for future improvements.

At the base of the lighthouse is the database management foundation of acquiring unfiltered facts about the physical environment with employees learning to use intrapersonal coping skills.

The second level is about using systems theory to organise information into patterns and procedures; employees use interpersonal, helping skills in a more emotional environment.

The third level may be termed knowledge management because it is where employees begin to control the knowledge in a more predictable context and use their volition and adaptability in an enlightening manner.

The fourth level, concerned with strategic management, is one of intellectual endeavour and the managing of stress through an understanding of relativism and a growing sense of personal esteem and empowerment.

The highest level is where ethics provides the prevailing mood, and uncertainty is managed by a compassionate and edifying spiritual leadership that finds its practical essence in wisdom.

When individuals, their work groups and the organisation operate in such a seamless, efficient sharing of knowledge, the non-productive time disappears from the workday, knowledge management technologies are enthusiastically embraced and the organisation is able to redefine as necessary to achieve productivity improvements. In a sense, understanding the development of wisdom in an organisation can lead to new

approaches to strategic reflection, to different notions of leadership and to more holistic and democratic ways of expressing authority in organisations.

One might well build on the idea of Vince (2001: 7) that “the challenge for the development of theory and practice of organisational learning is a shift of emphasis from learning by experience to *learning by organising*” by adding the concept of learning with wisdom. Without understanding of, and practicing within, the pyramid of wisdom, the personal and organisational roads to success are likely to be bleak, illusions overpowering and accomplishments short-lived.

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