

Giving Wise Advice

Results of an empirical study

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Wisdom and ethics

- ❑ Wisdom is a virtue, meaning that it is seen as acting above and beyond ethical standards
- ❑ Wisdom is manifested in making decisions in complex situations like:
 - Situations that lack clearcut ethical standards
 - Situations in which moral imperatives conflict (moral dilemmas)
 - Situations characterized by ambiguity
 - Wicked problems (solutions cause other problems)



Empirical evidence supports the notion that wisdom is...

- ❑ Easier to recognize than practice
- ❑ A form of tacit knowledge
- ❑ A form of expertise (mastered through experience)
- ❑ A mental talent relatively immune from the ravages of aging (but it is not related to aging)



Meaning of wisdom in business

- ❑ maturity of judgment
- ❑ understanding of the limitations of one's actions
- ❑ knowing what one does and does not know
- ❑ possession of a long-term perspective
- ❑ knowing when not to act as well as when one should act
- ❑ acceptance of reality
- ❑ ability to distinguish substance from style
- ❑ acceptance of the validity of other peoples' beliefs



Business Occasions for Wisdom

- ❑ Difficult conflict situations – sexual harassment, office politics, establishing responsibility for problem situations
- ❑ Policy making – especially where benefits and burdens have to be redistributed in a new way
- ❑ Advice giving – help in crisis situations or with chronic problems



Research Question

- ❑ What are the characteristics of advice messages that are perceived as wise?
 - Knowing this will enable us to identify wise advice when we see it.
 - Knowing this will enable us to craft wise advice messages in a way that makes them recognizable as such.
 - Knowing this may enable us to grow in wisdom
 - By three methods we may learn wisdom: first by reflection, which is the noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the most bitter.” --Confucius



Methodology

- ❑ Subjects – 148 evening MBA students (avg age=33; 83% employed full time; 66% male; 36% US citizens.
- ❑ Method – Each subject was asked to prepare an advice message to a person experiencing a moral dilemma. These advice messages were judged by other students according to how wise each was.



Methodology (continued)

- ❑ Independent judges identified common features of each advice message.
- ❑ The dilemma: A justice vs. care dilemma involving a widowed single father with a serious attendance problem whose co-workers are tiring of “covering for him.” The manager has asked for advice.



Findings – Wise advice

- ❑ Wise messages *attend to the recipient* as well as the problem situation, i.e., advice concerns not just what the recipient should do, but how she should feel or care for herself.
- ❑ Wise messages are *understanding*, i.e., they acknowledge the perceptual, cognitive, and social limits on the recipient.



More results

- ❑ Wise messages *focus on root causes* rather than manifestations, i.e., advice is based on explanations for the present situation.
- ❑ Wise messages *specify contingencies*, i.e., situations in which the advice message applies.
- ❑ Wise messages *contain maxims, proverbs, or memorable sayings.*



Example-

Layoff vs. Spreading the Pain

- ❑ ***Attend to the recipient*** – acknowledge personal burden of dilemma
- ❑ ***Be Understanding*** – identify the constraints and see if they can be relaxed
- ❑ ***Focus on root causes*** – inquire about the causes of the layoff
- ❑ ***Specify contingencies*** – if/then advice form
- ❑ ***Use maxims*** – e.g., “Once you decide, don’t look back”



Implications for an ethics officer

- ❑ Ethics consultations
- ❑ Ethics help-lines
- ❑ Managing/mentoring other members of the organization

