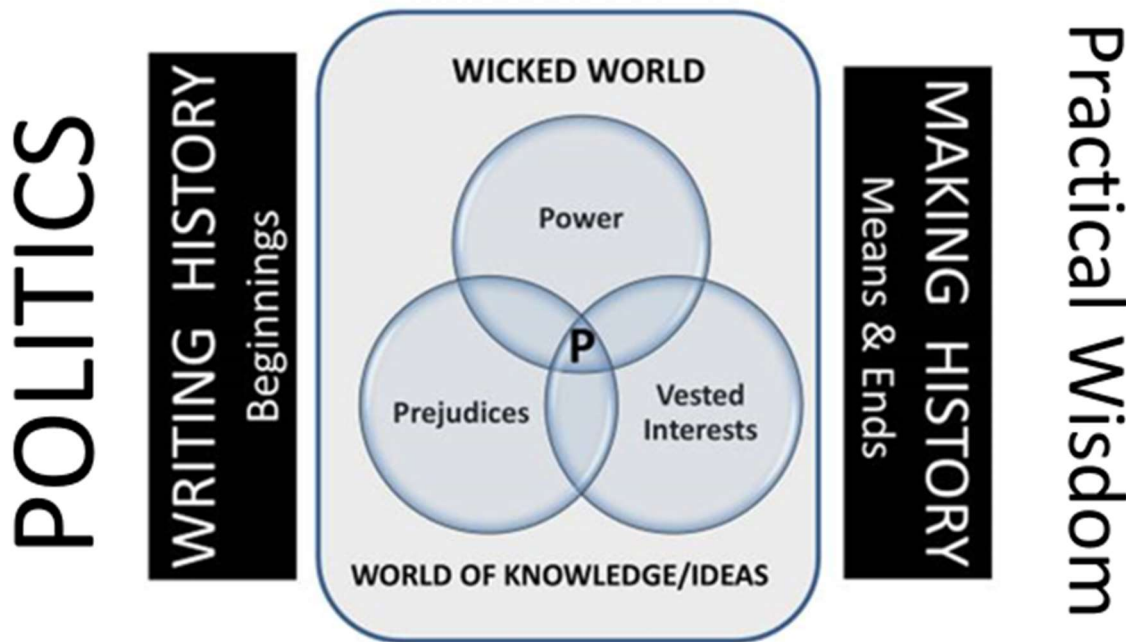


Politics – Reading 3

“One of Metis you must be if a Phronimos you are to become” [Lenney]

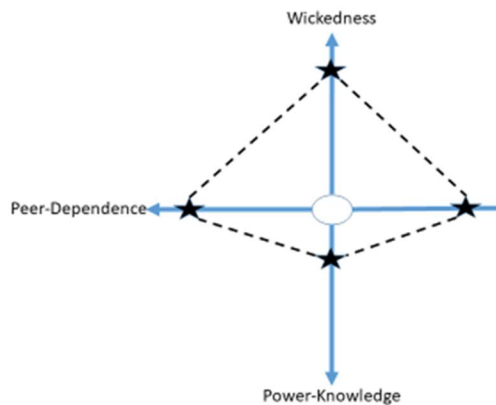


All managerial work is political – it sits as the ‘P’ in the overlap above – the power infused melding of interests & perspectives in the writing & making of history – a practice that requires practical wisdom. But some managerial work is, it can be argued, more political than others. The degree of ‘politicality’ can be seen to depend on several factors. Four factors are used below in an attempt to evaluate different managerial roles – it is a characterisation I call ‘**job shape**’. It is simply a provocation of reflective thinking that I have found useful – it is not an attempted theoretic. The factors deployed are:

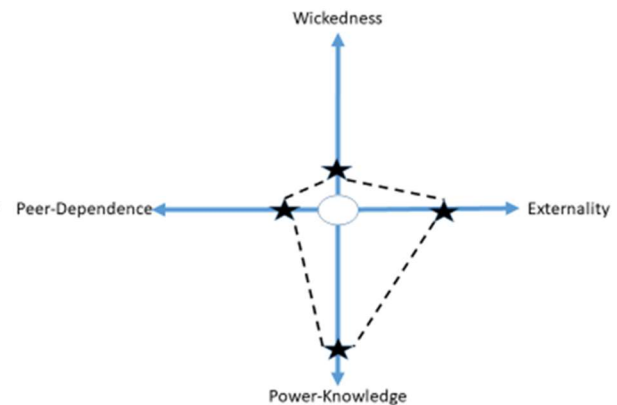
1. Issue/Problem Wickedness
 - The degree to which highly wicked problems dominate the manager/leader’s issue portfolio
2. Peer Dependence/ Authority-Responsibility Congruence
 - What the manager/leader is seen as being responsible for delivering, versus the authority/resource-control invested in the position
 - The extent of discretionary cooperation that is required.
 - The extent to which the achievement of the core objectives of the role occupied are dependent on the objective achievement of others
3. Externality
 - The importance of direct contact with, and the degree of reliance on, external actors
4. Power-Knowledge
 - The degree of expert character seen to be attached to the ‘profession’ of which the role is nominally part.

One can reflect and draw simple star charts of roles you know and/or occupy. My reflection on two roles I know very well is set out below – I hope it provokes some reflection.

Marketing Director

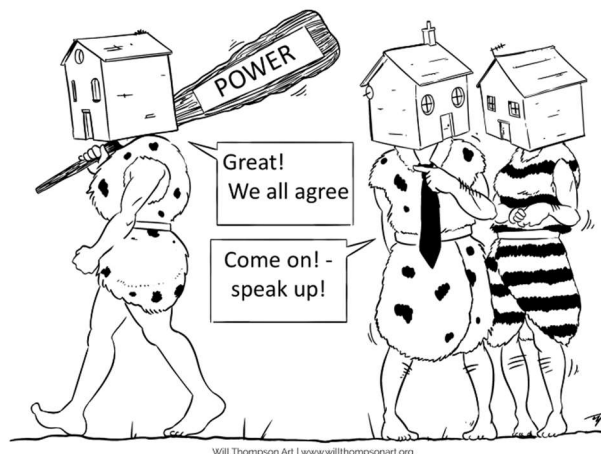


R&D Director



The diagrammatic reflections above bring me personally back to the importance of 'power' – but of two different forms – power-knowledge: the club that your 'accepted expertness'/profession equips you with, and the other club: the power of authority - control over the resources, of whatever form, demanded by your objectives. Also the difference in the wickedness of the circumstances faced in the two roles was dramatic – the core problems I faced in my R&D roles were decidedly tame – those in marketing were seriously wicked! As a result, the senior R&D job I did early in my career was a political walk in the park compared to the later Marketing role and, to be quite frank, my experience of the former arena of management in no way prepared me for the latter! In no way, back then, was I a reflective practitioner, but I have my doubts that any simple un-provoked reflection on that R&D experience would have helped anyway. Aristotle would have agreed that for the marketing role practical wisdom was vital. Being an 'uncritical' scientist was a hindrance to its pursuit – though as I learned it was a great 'club' to have as a marketing director. As Eryl Morris, my old boss, said: "Peter, you simply are the only one around this board table that knows what they are talking about on the most important issues that face us". Such a club/power brings with it a fundamental responsibility for reflexivity – mindful you must be of the clubs you carry – the scientist one is huge!

As I reflect on the contrast of these roles the other thing that always hits me is that the pursuit of consensus outside of highly tame circumstances is pointless - it is highly unlikely that actual consensus is ever possible when the issues faced are wicked. The dialogic target that can be realistically pursued is what I term '**concordance**' – where we 'agree' the basis on which we will act – despite us maybe being doubtful as to some of its components – we agree to disagree possibly, and then 'go along with it – whatever it is'. All we can ever hope for in our 'strategizing' – our discussions at to '*what the fog, is going on & why, where the fog do we want to go by when, & how the fog are we going to get there & there at the same time with no more fogging money*' – is a robust concordance, and the powerful imaginative, well-reasoned dialogue of the practically wise is the way to achieve it. Mindful they are of the dialogue distorting clubs they carry - **do we 'really' have concordance is the question** always to the front of the Mindful Manager's mind.



All of which brings me to the 'problem' of speaking up, a very personal story, and the last ancient Greek conceptions that we shall encounter on this journey – those of 'Cleverness' and Metis.

When I took over as the Worldwide Business Director of International Marine Coatings, back in 1992, I was summoned down to Corporate HQ by someone you now know – Eryl - to whom I would now report directly. He had rung me from Hong Kong the day before to ask me to do the job – well I say ask, tell me might be a better way of putting it – now he wanted to see me face to face, and fast. Excited but fearful I flew to London. On route I generated a well populated list of important & urgent topics that he might wish to discuss. His topic took me by surprise – it was not really a topic at all. He had got me to fly to London simply to say something to me face-to-face. As I shook his hand in saying hello he said - *"Peter, I just need to tell you something as you take up this job. **If I ever find out that you are not telling me what you really think, I'll fire you** – thanks for coming down – I've got to dash – I'm sure you've got lots to get done down here"*. Some 4 years later, at the end of a very successful global sales conference in Singapore, Eryl's replacement as Divisional CEO, Neville, tapped me on the chest with his knuckles and said *"Peter, I can see that you are someone with **the courage of your convictions** – you stick to them"*. Two years on I made a presentation to the Divisional Executive Board, part of which laid out what I saw as the detailed origins of the substantial and rapid uplift in profitability I/we had achieved in the previous year – the conversations with Eryl & Neville had stuck with me. This was not, however, the story that was being told by some with interests in different interpretations of the causes. As I left the room my Technical Director, and old friend, John, put his arm around my shoulders and said: *"You're finished here, lad – That's not how **Neville** is spinning it to the board – that would mean giving all the credit to Eryl for sorting out the U.S."*. I was gone within 6 months.

Some 5 years on, as part of my Ph.D. I listened to one of the Marketing Directors I was studying say:

"...I've got a clear view of where we should be going.. there will come a time when this disagreement with Global is going to come to a head.. then y'know it may become.. you either execute or ..you stand up and say no; quite a decision given [Adam]'s sudden departure"

His predecessor as UK Marketing Director, Adam, had been summarily dismissed for resisting the demands of global HQ. As I already knew from personal experience, the advocacy of certain views can be 'career threatening' in organizations.

Having the 'courage of your convictions' and 'speaking truth to power' might be demanded, and for 'good' reasons – but these behaviours do not necessarily pay off for those involved – and those making these demands are not necessarily to be trusted. In whom to trust is maybe the most crucial judgement of all, and being 'thoughtfully fearful' may be a useful stance to have in life. The Aristotelian golden mean of **courage** rests on the spectrum from **recklessness** to **cowardice** – judging where to stand thereon is yet another challenge.

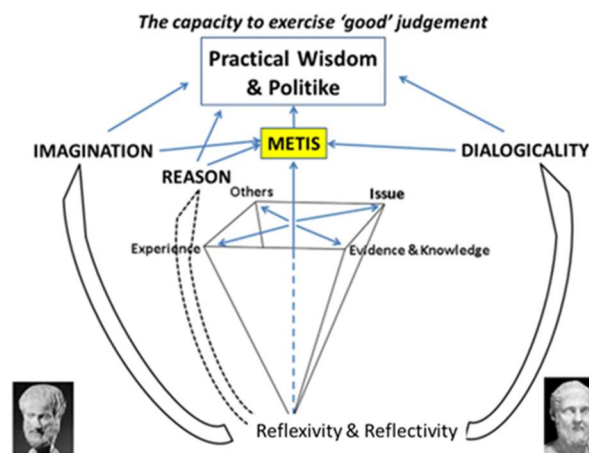
To be practically wise Aristotle says we must have 'cleverness' – something the pre-Socratics termed **Metis** – a cunning intelligence that drives deft social conduct. In the managerial context it can be seen as a capability to judge 'the impact of the shifting interests that are in play, and thence what to say, or not to say, to whom, when, where and how'. One can see the everyday managerial need to be 'clever' in the quote below from a conversation I had with another of my objects of study – a VP of Marketing in a massive I.T. firm –

"...because you know different people have different agendas.....even though you can maybe roughly work out what different people's agendas are.... you have to be very careful what conversations you have... it's very difficult within an organisation to have an open conversation with anybody"

The fact I am sitting here writing this demonstrates that I was not very 'clever' in the past – Pauline, my wife, would say that I was just plain stupid back then. I did not judge – I just acted in habit and 'by rule'. I was not wise, I did not choose to choose. Pauline's right - it is 'plain stupid' not to choose to choose – it is 'reckless'.

Metis is a capability that undergirds practical wisdom, and it rests on the same nexus of dispositions and capabilities. It rests most particularly on one's dispositions towards others and experience, as it

demands one to have a purposeful and keen interest in, and sensitivity to, the **vested interests** in play. It requires one to pay careful attention to certain aspects of the world in which we abide. Some of what we so perceive, may be distasteful to us – but this ‘bad’ flavour must count for nought in our evaluations of the circumstance with which we contend – we must be seriously reflexive in the interpretation of that which is revealed to us through these ‘**interesting**’ spectacles.



There are two simple but powerful characteristics of the book in which Aristotle discussed Practical Wisdom. One - it was the preparatory prequel to his book ‘The **Politics**’, and two - it was called ‘The **Nichomachean Ethics**’. It is the latter word to which we now briefly turn our attention here, and in the Week 10 reading.

In the personal case above I did not choose to choose, but if I had been wise, been alert to the vested interests in play, and had not acted in habit and judged, should I have chosen to act differently? When asked penetrating questions about the causality of the surge in profitability should I have told the ‘truth’ as I saw it? A tough call – such a major misunderstanding of cause could have led to a string of ill-founded strategic decisions with major deleterious effects. Should I have bent the truth around the story that Neville – the one with the bigger club – had wished to be taken as fact – despite the possible negative consequences for the business. If I had been alert to the circumstance, and had I understood that my job was on the line, should I still have done as I did, given the ‘truth to power’ principle that had been drilled in to me by Eryl? You can probably guess what Pauline says – we would have been a whole lot richer if I had S.T.F.U!

One can see in the above the **delicate interplay of individual ends and collective ends** caught in the judging of what is ‘right’. But being in a position to judge well what is ‘right’, requires a quality of engagement with the circumstance that discloses the pertinent interests - you have to be ‘**interested in interests**’ – I simply never was – I just did what was ‘right’ as I saw it, blindly acted in pursuit of the greater good, and paid the price. But was I wrong? – would it have been unethical to put my personal interests ahead of those of the firm? Would it have been unethical to lie about what I felt I knew, even if I understood the potentially horrendous personal consequences? You must judge.



Peter Lenney - Mindful Manager - Peter Lenney