SYSTEMIC NAVIGATION

What Do We Actually Mean By Organisational Wisdom?

Many leaders would claim the ingredients of wisdom. Far fewer organisations have the recipe.

by Neil Almond



I use the phrase organisational wisdom a lot. In conversations with clients, it has become shorthand for something I'm pointing towards, without always stopping to define it. So, it seems worth pausing to do that properly.

The honest starting point is that nobody agrees on what wisdom is, in organisations or anywhere else. Researchers come at it from psychology, theology, anthropology, metaphysics and business, each with a different lens. Some put ethics at the very core of wisdom. Others treat reasoning and ethics as entirely separate questions. A few go further, suggesting that putting "organisation" and "wisdom" in the same sentence is close to an oxymoron. After all, how many people in corporate boardrooms would most of us readily call wise?

Difficult isn't the same as absent

I don't think that scepticism is unreasonable. Most executives are rewarded for short-term profits, and in some jurisdictions, directors carry a formal duty to maximise shareholder value, whatever that costs elsewhere. Plenty of organisations are built in ways that make wisdom genuinely hard to practise, whatever the people inside them might want.

But difficult isn't the same as absent. When I dug into the research properly for my MBA dissertation, a workable definition did emerge, and I still find it useful. Wise organisations act judiciously and prudently, with a full appreciation of context. They respond to complex problems in contentious circumstances in a far-sighted and appropriate way. And they care about, and prepare for, a future that matters.

That's a mouthful, so it helps to unpack it. Four characteristics do a lot of the work.

An orientation to the common good

Wisdom research comes back to this again and again, almost as a defining feature. It means a genuine orientation towards outcomes in which more people win, including those beyond those an organisation already identifies with. It's different from charity, and different from compromise for its own sake.

Crucially, it's active. Talking about systemic or societal change doesn't count. Wisdom in this sense has to be enacted. In Systemic Navigation we'd call this systemic wisdom: asking what is wisest for the wider system, alongside what is wisest for us, and acting on the answer.

Holding a temporal map

Strategic decisions don't happen in a vacuum. They're shaped by the past, land in the present and ripple forward into a future the organisation may never see. A wise organisation can hold that whole arc at once. It looks well beyond next quarter's numbers, sometimes across generations, and will accept a short-term sacrifice for something further out.

I wrote about this in my piece on strategy as a direction. In Systemic Navigation, we hold the temporal map as a direction with a rhythm: a Systemic North Star to steer by, and regular moments to check where you are against it.

Perspective-taking

Too many organisational decisions get made from a single, self-interested vantage point. A wiser organisation recognises that any decision touches many stakeholders, inside and outside, and does the real work of exploring how a choice lands for each of them.

Done well, this goes much further than consultation or compromise, where everyone ends up with a diluted outcome. It means holding genuinely different worldviews in tension long enough to find something that works for more of them. I've long used the image of the mapmaker for this: the map we make with a client is a map of their territory, and a wise leader is willing to stand inside other people's maps for a while before returning to their own.

Moral maturity and self-awareness

Wise organisations, and the people who lead them, show real congruence between what they say and what they do. That takes a degree of self-awareness and intellectual humility that's rarer than it should be: the willingness to see past your own ego and hold your own view with a little scepticism.

Integrity, empathy, and fairness recur in the research. So does something less often discussed: passion. Without it, the other traits tend to sit flat. Passion is what energises the rest. It's also why Systemic Navigation treats the practitioner as the first instrument of the work. Who you are shapes what you can see, and what you can help others see.

Wisdom lives in the pattern

None of these characteristics is exotic. Most leaders would claim all four in some form. The harder truth is that holding them as separate traits isn't the same as being wise.

The research is fairly clear on this. Wisdom lives in the relationship between the characteristics, in the pattern they form together. An organisation with a strong temporal map but no real perspective-taking isn't wise; it's just patient. An organisation with genuine multi-stakeholder awareness but no moral backbone isn't wise either; it's just accommodating.

Anyone who works with systems will recognise this. A system's behaviour comes from how its parts relate, far more than from the parts themselves, and wisdom turns out to work the same way. It's an emergent property. That's exactly why it's so hard to build deliberately, and so easy to talk about without practising.

It also points to a fifth characteristic, the one that holds the other four together: the ability to hold paradox and complexity without flattening them. That's where wisdom and systemic thinking come closest of all, and it's the subject of the next piece in this series.

For the navigator

If you'd like to test how wise your own organisation is, here are some questions worth sitting with.

- Who wins when your organisation wins, and who is missing from that list?
- Where are you talking about the common good without yet enacting it?
- How far ahead does your organisation genuinely look, and what short-term gain would you give up for something further out?
- Whose map of your situation have you never stood inside?
- Where do your words and your actions drift apart, and who would notice first?
- Which of the four characteristics is strongest in your organisation, and what happens to it without the others?
- What's one decision this month where you could practise all four at once, one degree further than usual?

This article is part of a short series reflecting on my MBA research into organisational wisdom and strategy among UK B Corps, from a Systemic Navigation perspective.

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