SYSTEMIC NAVIGATION

Wise for Whom? Small Wisdom, Big Wisdom and the Wider System

A badge can name good character. It can't create it, and it can't tell you who that character is good for.

by Neil Almond



Certification can tell you a lot about an organisation. It can also tell you almost nothing. When I interviewed leaders from eight UK B Corps for my MBA research, the most striking thing was how many of them said, one way or another, that certification hadn't changed who they were. It had given a name to something already there.

One founder put it more bluntly than most. B Corp, he said, was "a less than concept than our concept". It hadn't really changed how they behaved. For him and several others, certification was a way to communicate their prosocial practice, a badge for behaviours they already engaged in.

That matters if you're looking to certification, or any framework, as a route to becoming a better organisation. A framework can describe good practice. The character needed to sustain it must come from elsewhere.

You can't monitor your employees' souls

That line came from another participant, almost in passing, and it has stayed with me. He was talking about the limits of process and oversight. You can build recruitment criteria, values statements and onboarding programmes, and they're all useful. None of them guarantees alignment. At some point, an organisation must simply trust the character of the people inside it.

Several leaders described the risk this creates. One recalled a new employee dismissing the organisation's people, planet and profit framing as something you could say about a piece of rubbish on the floor. The unease that followed was immediate: our message is getting lost, and we need to change. Another talked candidly about the checks and balances they'd built in to keep pulling themselves back to purpose, so they wouldn't end up, in his words, "looking like Brewdog in five years' time".

That's a clear-eyed reading of how organisations work. Values drift is real, and no certification catches until the consequences are already felt. It must be defended continuously from the inside, largely through who you let in. Being off-values, one participant told me, was a complete no-no in recruitment. She was careful to add that this was different from hiring people who all look like you, which brings its own problems. Genuine alignment, deliberately tested, was non-negotiable.

Holding the paradox

What surprised me most was how comfortably these leaders sat with contradiction. The conversation often turned to whether big, traditionally capitalist businesses could certify without hollowing the whole idea out. Could Nestlé, Brewdog or Danone become genuine B Corps, or would commercial incentive always win over substance?

Nobody gave a clean answer, and nobody seemed to want one. One participant reasoned that even a difficult, imperfect organisation moving just two percent in the right direction could have a significant impact on the world, because of its sheer scale. Another, talking about a completely different values debate, made a point that applies just as well here. Forcing either side of an argument rarely works. Both sides usually have something real to offer, and the skill lies in how you channel them.

Small wisdom and big wisdom

91Untold's Chair, Sarah Smith, offers a useful distinction here, from her research with Bretherton (Smith and Bretherton, 2021). Small wisdom is the momentary kind: a good judgement call, made well, in a particular situation. Big wisdom is the deeper, systemic and cultural kind. It runs through an organisation's own systems and shows up in everything it does, without anyone having to prompt it.

On the whole, the organisations I studied were operating from big wisdom. That probably explains why certification looked to some of them like a lesser concept than their own culture. Certification

works by codifying good practice into criteria, which is a way of teaching small wisdom to organisations that don't yet have it. Seen from inside a big-wisdom culture, that will naturally look thin.

Big wisdom is about more than depth, though. The wisdom research points to two qualities close to its heart. One is a genuine orientation to the common good: outcomes where more people win, beyond the people an organisation already identifies with. The other is the ability to hold paradox, keeping competing ideas in tension long enough to see what each has to offer. The leaders in my study showed both, and you can hear them in that debate about the giants.

Wise for whom?

In Systemic Navigation we use a related pair of ideas. Local wisdom asks what is wisest for this team, this organisation or this community. Systemic wisdom asks what is wisest for the wider system that the team belongs to. The two often line up. Sometimes they pull apart, and noticing when that starts to happen is the daily work of stewardship.

Sarah and I could happily spend an evening debating exactly how these ideas relate, and a short article can't do that justice. At the risk of being a little reductive, here's how I see it. Small wisdom is often local: a good call, for us, today. Big wisdom holds both. Its care for the common good keeps the wider system in view, and its ability to hold paradox lets it carry local and systemic wisdom together when they pull in different directions.

That's exactly what the two percent argument was doing. From a local view, the small, deeply aligned B Corp is obviously the wiser organisation. From the system's view, a two percent shift inside a global food company might do more for the world than a perfect small firm ever could. Both readings are true at once. Big wisdom holds them together and asks what each one makes possible.

It also explains what B Corp certification is for. At its best, it brings questions about people, planet and community into everyday decisions, through criteria anyone can learn. Small wisdom, pointed at the wider system. For an organisation already living from big wisdom, that will feel thin. For one that has never asked who else its decisions touch, it might be the first time anyone has drawn the boundary wider.

A pathway

None of this is a criticism of B Corp certification, or of the organisations still working towards it. If anything, it points to a pathway.

Small wisdom can be taught, coached and built deliberately, one decision at a time. Practised often enough, it starts to become culture. Along the way, the circle of care has to widen, so that each decision asks who else it touches, and keeps asking even when the answer is inconvenient. And the organisation must learn to hold the tension when local and systemic pull apart. Sometimes local gain should give way to the health of the wider system. Sometimes the local must be strengthened first, before it has anything to give.

That's a realistic route for a larger, more traditionally commercial organisation, even if it never fully attains the instinctive culture that the smaller organisations in my study already had. The dial doesn't move because a framework was adopted. It moves because character, individually and collectively, was built to deserve it.

For the navigator

Whether or not you're thinking about B Corp certification, here are some questions worth sitting with.

- Which of your values would survive if nobody were checking?
- When a new person joins, what do they learn about who you really are, and how quickly?
- When you say a decision was wise, who was it wise for?
- Where does your organisation's boundary of care stop, and who decided that?
- When was the last time local wisdom and systemic wisdom pulled apart for you, and how did you hold the tension?
- Where are you relying on a framework to do the work that only character can do?
- What's one decision this month where you could draw the boundary one degree wider 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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