

Easy Wisdom

The Circulation of Easy Wisdom and the Collapse of Leadership Thinking

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I. The Format of Wisdom Without Judgment

This reflection began while watching an older video in which [Slavoj Žižek](#), the volcanic Slovenian philosopher and Lacanian psychoanalyst, mocked the contemporary idea of wisdom (the link is [here](#), please watch it, I can't quite render his pathos).

In the video Žižek performs a simple demonstration, articulating four short statements, each gesturing toward a different posture on life:

1. Reject immediate pleasures in favor of eternity;
2. Reject eternity in favor of the present;
3. Reconcile the two by finding eternity in fleeting moments;
4. Accept that one is suspended between the two without resolution.

Each statement contradicted the others, yet all could be styled as “wise” with minimal effort. And even watching the video again, knowing exactly where the demonstration is heading, it is difficult not to feel the reflex of agreement rising with each line as if on cue. The point was not the content but the format: by following the recognizable structure of profundity, any position could pass as insight. The ease with which these sentences could circulate revealed something about the current cultural demand for quick, frictionless orientation.

This demonstration reveals a broader pattern. Wisdom has shifted from an engagement with difficulty to a recognizable format. The modern marketplace of ideas favors the repeatable, the transferable, and the easily consumed. If a sentence conforms to the expected structure - two abstractions, a light contrast, a conciliatory gesture - its truth-value becomes secondary. What matters is recognizability. This is the environment in which Žižek’s experiment lands: a setting where format outruns substance, and where the appearance of insight often displaces the experience of it.

II. The Drift of Leadership Thinking Toward Interchangeable Insight

This mechanism extends far beyond philosophy or self-help. Contemporary leadership discourse has absorbed the same architecture. The material that circulates most widely shares the same attributes as those prefabricated wisdom fragments: abstract formulations, broad universal applicability, and validation through tone rather than a disciplined examination of context. Encouraging “authenticity,” “empowerment,” “presence,” or “courage” becomes a matter of style rather than analysis. And naturally, no one volunteers to oppose courage or question empowerment; these are virtues designed to be agreed with, not examined. The terms function as floating signifiers. They acquire authority not through a demonstrated connection to organizational realities but through their alignment with familiar patterns of what leadership is supposed to sound like.

This produces a subtle shift. *Leadership talk* moves from clarifying decisions to offering attitudes. Instead of examining the competing pressures that define a specific situation, individuals are encouraged to adopt a stance that can be applied in any context. The model suggests that leadership can be practiced through a portable set of virtues – which change depending on the context - each framed as universally relevant, none of which is anchored in a serious exploration of the actual constraints confronting a leader at any given moment. This approach is appealing not because it increases competence, but because it reduces discomfort. It offers conceptual mobility - one can always rotate to another virtue - while avoiding the constraint of commitment that real leadership requires.

A simple illustration shows how easily this works.

When a team underperforms, the leader can call for “more empowerment.” When empowerment generates confusion, the leader can pivot to “clearer direction.” When direction feels heavy-handed, the leader can return to “authenticity” or “servant leadership.” Each shift appears justified. None requires a confrontation with the structural reasons behind the underperformance. The rotation of virtues creates the impression of adaptation without demanding the analysis that adaptation requires.

III. Call the Consultant

It is therefore unsurprising that organizations frequently externalize responsibility when the moment of decision arrives. When confronted with conflict, ambiguity, or competing priorities, the common solution is to “call the consultant.” Consultants are often used not for their insight into the situation, but for their function as a buffer. They allow leaders to implement decisions they already wish to make, often self-serving, without owning them directly. When a proposal meets resistance, it becomes “technically correct” because an external authority endorsed it. Leadership becomes procedural rather than substantive. The exercise shifts from judgment to justification.

This displacement mirrors broader cultural patterns. In environments where meaning is unstable, prepackaged stances offer temporary coherence. They relieve individuals of the burden of defining their own priorities. Rather than developing the capacity to articulate what matters under particular conditions, individuals adopt positions that are already socially formatted. The rotation of leadership virtues mirrors this psychological movement. Leaders are encouraged to perform the language of depth rather than engage the work that produces it. Without the discipline of contextual analysis, leadership becomes a performance of cues rather than a practice of evaluation.

IV. Judgment, Consequence, and the Loss of Situational Analysis

A more durable account of wisdom begins from an older logic: the work of discernment. In classical ethics, as articulated by Aristotle, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is defined not by universal statements but by the ability to evaluate competing obligations, understand the constraints of a particular situation, and accept the consequences of prioritizing one good over another.¹ It is a capacity for decision, not a technique for avoiding conflict. Later accounts of moral and political judgment, such as Isaiah Berlin’s analysis of value pluralism, underline the same structure.² Values often collide. No formulation can harmonize them completely. Wisdom arises from

choosing despite this lack of harmony, not from offering elegant formulations that appear to resolve it.

Leadership, when understood on these terms, is inseparable from the assumption of responsibility. It begins by acknowledging that decisions occur within conditions that cannot be controlled and that choices will generate winners and losers. Leadership as a practice involves interpreting ambiguous signals, determining which priorities must prevail, and accepting that every decision forecloses alternatives. Max Weber captured this dynamic in his account of the “ethic of responsibility,” in which authority exists precisely because someone must bear the consequences of action.³ Later analyses of leadership as adaptive work expand this point: leadership is not a catalogue of transferable attitudes but a process of making judgments in the presence of competing claims, uncertainty, and constraint.⁴

The contemporary leadership industry obscures this underlying structure. By reframing structural and organizational problems as matters of personal posture, it shifts the burden of leadership away from judgment and toward stylized expressions of virtue. Leaders are encouraged to embody “empathy,” “courage,” or “vulnerability,” without understanding how these dispositions interact with institutional dynamics, power structures, or strategic demands. The result is a decoupling of leadership language from leadership practice. Individuals become fluent in the vocabulary of transformation while remaining disconnected from the work that transformation requires.

This leads to predictable outcomes. When leaders adopt generalized principles rather than situational analysis, decisions lose their grounding in reality. Without grounding, accountability weakens. Without accountability, leadership dissolves into impression management. Leaders talk about clarity without confronting trade-offs. They talk about empathy without addressing the structural sources of conflict. They talk about empowerment without contending with the organizational constraints that limit it. The distance between expression and action widens until the two become independent domains.⁵

V. Fragmented Meaning and the Preference for Conceptual Ease

These developments reflect a larger cultural difficulty with the demands of judgment. Meaning in contemporary life is often fragmented. Frameworks that once provided orientation now compete with each other or have dissolved entirely. In such an environment, individuals gravitate toward fragments that signal understanding without requiring the work of interpretation. Short statements optimized for circulation - clean contrasts, neutral abstractions, light gestures toward complexity - function as stabilizers. They temporarily relieve the discomfort of ambiguity. They produce coherence without requiring it.

This mechanism operates not only at the individual level but at the organizational and cultural levels as well. Communication systems that prioritize speed and efficiency reward messages that can be recognized instantly. The result is the proliferation of conceptual cues that resemble insight. They offer the sensation of comprehension while insulating individuals from the demands that comprehension imposes. The cues are easily applied, easily repeated, and easily abandoned. They mimic the structure of understanding while bypassing its substance.

A brief example illustrates this mechanism.

When an organization faces high turnover, one department will attribute it to “culture,” another to “lack of purpose,” another to “poor communication,” and yet another to “insufficient recognition.” Each explanation fits a familiar conceptual cue. Any of them can be made to sound authoritative. And because each explanation is vague, any of them can be abandoned when circumstances change. The cues offer the sensation of comprehension while insulating individuals from the demands that comprehension imposes.

In this environment, leadership becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from performance. The forms of insight multiply while the capacities that support judgment erode. The language of leadership becomes detached from the realities of organizational life. Symbols displace decisions. Stances displace strategies. The result is a culture in which the appearance of leadership is easier to generate than the practice of it.

Žižek's simple demonstration, in this light, is not merely an aside about superficial wisdom. It offers a template for understanding a broader cultural drift. When culture learns to treat contradictory statements as equally profound, and when leadership learns to treat contradictory virtues as equally authoritative, the capacity for judgment weakens.

At a societal level, treating insight as interchangeable gradually undermines the very mechanisms through which a community deliberates. Public discourse becomes dominated by the circulation of attitudes rather than analysis. Institutions struggle to make decisions because the individuals within them lack the reflexes required to navigate competing claims. Citizens gravitate toward positions that resemble understanding rather than positions grounded in it. The cultural cost is cumulative: a slow erosion of seriousness, a weakening of interpretive capacity, and a growing difficulty in distinguishing between ideas that clarify reality and ideas that merely imitate the form of clarity.

VI. Reintroducing Judgment as a Practical Discipline



If the critique exposes a cultural drift, the response begins with restoring the link between judgment and action. A viable alternative does not require new slogans or a refreshed vocabulary of virtues. It requires a shift in how individuals think about decisions, consequences, and context. The central task is to rebuild the capacity for discernment, for *phronesis*, the ability to evaluate competing obligations, understand constraints, and choose a direction even when the choice is costly.

At the theoretical level, this means acknowledging that no single virtue or leadership posture can resolve the structural tensions inherent in modern organizations. Effective action depends on interpreting the situation before selecting a stance. Instead of beginning with principles - authenticity, empowerment, purpose - the process begins with an analysis of what the environment demands: what pressures are present, what trade-offs cannot be eliminated, and what outcomes are acceptable. This reorders leadership from a sequence of preferred attitudes to a practice of situational evaluation.

The practical implications are equally clear. The discipline of judgment is built through habits that counter the cultural drift toward interchangeable insight. These habits include defining the problem before naming the virtue, distinguishing what is difficult from what is vague, and asking which constraints are real rather than assumed. They include revisiting decisions after the fact, not to defend them but to understand how context shaped them and how different interpretations might have led to different outcomes.

A personal anecdote makes the point. Years ago, I presented a post-project appraisal to a board whose members included a former German chancellor, a former Russian minister, the CEO of one of the major oil companies, and several individuals commonly described as oligarchs, among them my own CEO. The appraisal was direct: the project had not gone well. When I finished outlining the failure points, the room went quiet. The CEO looked at me and asked, *“So you’re saying we need to be tougher and smarter?”* For a moment, I assumed the discussion was about to take a familiar turn and that my role in the organization might be ending. Instead, after a long pause, which felt eternal, he nodded and with a faint smile said, *“You’re absolutely correct. We didn’t get this one right.”*

There was no blame, no defensiveness, no search for a scapegoat. Just an acknowledgment that the outcome was poor and that the point of the appraisal was to understand why, so the same mistakes were not repeated. It was a clear demonstration of responsibility in practice, without drama or theatrics. The explicit acceptance of responsibility, this is what leadership looks like.

This orientation also shifts how organizations use expertise. Instead of outsourcing responsibility to consultants or external authorities, leaders can use external input as data rather than validation. Expertise becomes a resource for informing decisions, not a mechanism for avoiding them. The distinction matters. When leaders treat judgment as central, consultants become contributors. When leaders treat consultants as substitutes, judgment erodes.

The final change concerns how individuals engage with meaning itself. The reliance on conceptual cues - short statements that feel insightful - can be replaced by an interpretive posture that asks what a situation actually requires. This is a slower, more disciplined form of attention. It does not reject general principles, but it treats them as tools rather than destinations. It allows for humility without passivity and for confidence without simplification.

A culture that restores judgment in this way does not eliminate ambiguity; it becomes better equipped to navigate it. It does not abandon virtues; it situates them within the conditions that give them relevance. It does not pursue perfect coherence; it acknowledges that the work of decision-making is defined by the absence of it. What emerges is not a formula but a capacity: the ability to act with clarity in environments that offer very little of it.

Endnotes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999). Publisher link: <https://hackettpublishing.com/nicomachean-ethics>; Kristján Kristjánsson and Blaine J. Fowers, *Phronesis: Retrieving Practical Wisdom in Psychology, Philosophy, and Education*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024). Publisher link: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/phronesis-9780192871473?q=Phronesis&lang=en&cc=us>
2. Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Publisher link, 2013 edition: <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691155937/the-crooked-timber-of-humanity>; Göran Rosenberg, *Interview with Isaiah Berlin on Value Pluralism and Liberalism*, Swedish Television, 1997. On youtube: <https://youtu.be/lxn55CXTgKo?si=bmqUj3qwCrtau5GP>
3. Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946). Publisher link: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/from-max-weber-9780195004625?q=max%20weber&lang=en&cc=us>
4. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Publisher link: <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674518582>
5. For contemporary critiques of the leadership industry's reliance on interchangeable virtues and context-free slogans, see:
 - a. Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Leadership BS* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2015). Publisher link: <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/leadership-bs-jeffrey-pfeffer>
 - b. Barbara Kellerman, *The End of Leadership* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2012). Publisher link: <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/the-end-of-leadership-barbara-kellerman>Mats Alvesson and André Spicer, *The Stupidity Paradox* (London: Profile Books, 2016). Publisher link: <https://profilebooks.com/work/the-stupidity-paradox>