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Why a Good Teacher Must Be a Wise Teacher

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When the world financial system collapsed several years ago, politicians and policy makers sought to fix it. In doing so, they reached for two tools. They wondered, “how can we make better rules to control the bankers?” And they wondered, “how can we create smarter incentives?” Rules and incentives. Sticks and carrots. What else is there? Our leaders have had the same sort of responses to failures of public education. They have created rigid curricular structures—even scripts—that teachers are expected to follow, and a series of financial incentives (bonuses, salary increases, promotions) for those teachers whose students do well on standardized tests.

In this article, I will suggest that though we do sometimes need better rules and smarter incentives, neither of those is enough. What we also need is virtue—character. And we need a particular virtue—what Aristotle called “practical wisdom.” I will describe why we need practical wisdom in professional life, what practical wisdom is, how it is being threatened, and how we can respond to the threat. My story is complicated and I can’t do it justice in a brief article. I urge those who want to know more to read my book with Kenneth Sharpe *called Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*.

Washing Floors

Let’s begin with an example, based on a study of hospital custodians. Amy Wrzesniewski and some colleagues studied the work lives of custodians at a major hospital. Their list of “official duties” was more than 25-items long. It included the obvious things, like washing, sweeping, dusting, emptying trash, restocking supplies and so on. What was striking about the list is that not a single item on it even mentioned another human being. They could just as well have been custodians in a funeral home as in a hospital.

And yet, here was Mike:

Sometimes I might start waxing and a patient comes out and he wants to walk up and down the hall. He wants to get the exercise. As soon as I get ready, he’ll start. I don’t bother him. I’ll just wait ‘cause I know I can’t tell them to go sit down. They need to build themselves up and that’s what I have to tell my supervisor, “Couldn’t do it, because of the patients.”

And here was Charlayne:

I treat them with respect. I know, you know, why they're here and, like a lot of times when I go into the visitors lounge, you know, to clean, don't bother because a lot of times when I go in, they'll be asleep. I try to work with them because I know, you know, some of the things that they're going through with their relative.

And here was Luke:

Luke: And there was this other guy who snapped at me. I kind of knew the situation about his son. His son had been here for a long time and...from what I hear, his son had got into a fight and he was paralyzed. That's why he got there, and he was in a coma and he wasn't coming out of the coma... His father would stay here every day, all day, but he smoked cigarettes. So, he had gone out to smoke a cigarette and after I cleaned the room, he came back up to the room. I ran into him in the hall, and he just freaked out... telling me I didn't do it. I didn't clean the room and all this stuff. And at first, I got on the defensive, and I was going to argue with him. But I don't know. Something caught me and I said, "I'm sorry. I'll go clean the room."

Interviewer: And you cleaned it again?

Luke: Yeah, I cleaned it so that he could see me clean it...I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was here. He'd be a little frustrated, and so I cleaned it again. But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand.

The janitors deviated from the "rules" (their job description). They appreciated that their formal job description didn't begin to capture what they actually did, and what got them out of bed and off to work every day.

Teaching Fractions

Here's another example, from the classroom. As the year drew to a close, Deborah Ball was pleased with the progress being made in math by her third-grade class. The students had not only learned the rudiments of fractions but they had learned to think and reason for themselves. But teaching them to reason and problem-solve wasn't rote work. And this afternoon, she had a problem.

It started when Mei noticed that the larger the “number on top” of a fraction, “the bigger the piece you’ll end up [with].” Ball asked the class to figure out if Mei’s conjecture was correct. One student suggested talking about $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{5}{5}$. Ball could simply have told the class that these two fractions were the same. But instead, Ball had the students draw two rectangles in their notebooks, one divided into four parts and the other into five, and then to shade in the numerators.

“I was confident that everyone would soon realize that $\frac{5}{5}$ did not have ‘a bigger piece’ shaded in.” But when she asked the students, she was astonished. Some of the students chorused: “YES! Five-fifths did have a bigger piece shaded.” Cassandra began to argue: “five-fifths is not the same [as $\frac{4}{4}$], because they are different numbers just like three and two are different numbers. So how could they be the same?”

Ball tried again, reframing the question: “If Mei has $\frac{4}{4}$ of a cookie and Cassandra has $\frac{5}{5}$ of an identical cookie, who has more cookie?” Sheena went to the whiteboard and drew two cookies, one in four parts and one in five. Emphatically, she made her point: “With $\frac{5}{5}$ there is enough to pass out one piece to each of your five friends, but with $\frac{4}{4}$ one friend will not get a cookie.”

Ball believed that to teach the students, she had to get inside the thinking of those who concluded that $\frac{5}{5}$ was bigger than $\frac{4}{4}$ and figure out how to get them to see the equivalence. She knew that this demanded the skill to understand a student’s confusion and then help them overcome it. Ball tried to do this by regularly asking the students how they came to the conclusions they did, and by having them keep journals, which she read regularly, in which they wrote down their thinking and questions.

“I worried about Mei and Cassandra,” says Ball. “Each was so sure she was right. Each restated her position, a little more definitely, almost defiantly. Was this dispute mathematical or social?” It was difficult to know, said Ball, because her third graders are sometimes motivated “out of stubbornness” and sometimes “out of confidence. Sometimes their ideas drive the discussion, sometimes their relationships. More often than not, it is some combination of the two.” Ball knew that Cassandra often relished disagreeing with classmates, not always attending to the evidence they were giving. Mei often maintained a particular view while others in the class argued with her.

The moment also presented Ball with a classic, practical, ethical quandary of the sort that is embedded in almost any moment of teaching. She needed to balance the equal treatment of all students with the special needs of one or two. Should all students “share equally”—get the same amount of time and attention from a teacher, or should time “be distributed according to need” or perhaps “according to merit.” These different notions of fairness—Aristotle would say justice—are

legitimate, but often in radical conflict with each other. Yet to teach well, Ball needed the wisdom to balance these competing notions.

The class was split down the middle on the issue. How should she proceed? How should she balance critique with support, correction with encouragement? Determining how to correct anyone's mistake always raises quandaries like this for teachers—and for parents, friends, supervisors, and colleagues. Ball thinks a lot about the “hows” and “whys” of correcting students, about whether she should ask them to figure it out or tell them the correct answer, and how to prod them.

“We need to stop for a moment,” Ball told the class. Balancing principle and expediency, she decided just to tell them directly. She would show them that Cassandra and Sheena were right that the number of pieces would be more but that mathematically the size was the same so that $5/5$ and $4/4$ were the same. Ball pulled out two large white envelopes, turned them into imaginary cookies, and cut one into four pieces and one into five. She and the students talked about pieces and then taped the pieces back together to make the original “cookies”—both the same size. But Ball discovered that this telling and showing still did not quell the disagreement. Lucy argued “they both have the same” but Daniel responded, “I disagree because that one ($4/4$) has lots less 'cause it's got four, and [the other] five.” Ball pressed insistently. “I didn't ask which one had more pieces. I asked which one had more cookie.” But there was only five minutes until recess. Ball asked the students to write in their notebooks what they thought about the comparison of $4/4$ and $5/5$. She would take it up again tomorrow.

These two examples—of hospital janitors caring for sick people and their families and of a third-grade teacher dealing with confusion about fractions—are utterly mundane. Yet they point out how much we need people who want to do right by those they serve and who have the good judgment to figure out what “doing right” requires in a particular situation. The will to do the right thing, and the skill to determine what the right thing is, together comprise what Aristotle called *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Practical wisdom, thought Aristotle, is the master virtue, helping us to use our other virtues (honesty, kindness, courage, humility, perseverance, and the like) at the right time, and in the right way.

Don't get me wrong. We need rules. Rules provide us with anchors, with guidelines. But they are almost never enough. They are like a roadmap that gets us to the right city, but doesn't indicate the streets. It's true that we'll never find the street we're looking for without getting to the right city, but getting to the right city isn't enough. Rules make the world black and white, but in actuality, it is grey. They force us to treat everyone alike even when different people, in different circumstances,

need different things. Thus, it takes judgment to know whether, when, and how to apply rules. And judgment is not enough. Skilled judgment can be used to manipulate people to serve our ends, not theirs. So along with judgment, with skill, we need will—the will to do the right thing.

So what does this mix of will and skill that is practical wisdom consist of? Here is a partial list of what I take to be its key attributes:

1. A wise person knows that no two patients, students, or clients are alike, and appreciates that rules and standard procedures must be modified to allow for the diversity of human needs, circumstances, and aspirations. A wise person knows when and how to make “the exception to every rule.” But at the same time, no two patients, students, or clients are completely different, which is what allows wisdom to grow with experience.
2. A wise person knows how to improvise. Like a jazz musician, the rules (musical notes on the page) are the beginning, not the end of a performance. Real-world problems are often ambiguous and ill-defined, and the context is always changing. And a wise person knows that different situations demand different responses.
3. A wise person can take the perspective of another—to see the situation as she does and thus to understand how she feels. This perspective taking is what enables wise people to feel empathy for others and to make decisions that serve their client’s (student’s, patient’s, friend’s) needs.
4. A wise person knows how to choose when good rules (for example, “be honest” and “be kind”) conflict.
5. A wise person can find the Aristotelian “mean” between extremes, which is often where virtue lies (for example, the virtue of courage is the mean between the vices of recklessness and cowardice).
6. A wise person uses these skills in pursuit of the right aims. Wisdom is about doing, not just judging, and it’s about doing the things that meet the proper aims of the activity you are engaged in, and that meet the needs of the people you serve.
7. Finally, a wise person is an experienced person. People learn how to be brave, said Aristotle, by doing brave things, just as musicians learn improvisation in jazz through the experience of improvisation. But it’s not just any experience that teaches the skills of moral

improvisation. Developing wisdom requires that people be able to take initiative, make mistakes, and learn from their mistakes. Nobody is “born wise.” But everyone is born with the capacity to be wise.

I think what I’ve written so far is obvious. Yet, when we try to repair broken institutions, we don’t ask “what can we do about character?” We don’t ask, “how can we nurture wisdom?” Instead we ask, “how can we make better rules?” And “how can we design smarter incentives?” In asking these questions, we make war on wisdom, without realizing that we’re doing it.

War on Wisdom: The Dangerous Allure of Carrots and Sticks

Practitioners need wisdom to practice well. Yet, when things go wrong, managers, administrators, and policy makers don’t try to make practitioners wiser. Instead, they reach for tools that may ameliorate problems in the short run but make them worse in the long run. They reach for carrots and sticks, incentives and rules, in an effort to change the behavior of professionals. But the more professionals rely on rules and external incentives, the more the wisdom they need is endangered.

Rules and the War on Moral Skill

When you give practitioners too many rules to follow, they never get the chance to develop the skilled judgment it takes to find the right way to handle diverse and idiosyncratic situations. As American humorist Will Rogers once said, “some people have thirty years of experience; others have the same experience for thirty years.” Rule-bound practices create the latter kind of professionals. Here are some examples.

Lemonade

One day, early this spring, a father, a professor of archeology at the University of Michigan, took his 7-year-old to a Detroit Tigers baseball game. A few innings into the game, his son asked for lemonade. The dad dutifully went to a concession stand to get some. Mike’s Hard Lemonade (5% alcohol) was all they had, and the dad, having never heard of it, bought some and brought it to his son.

While they were cheering on the Tigers, a security guard happened to notice the child sipping lemonade from the bottle. He called the cops, who in turn called an ambulance. The ambulance came to the ballpark and rushed the child to the hospital. He had no trace of alcohol in him and the doctors were ready to discharge him.

But no, not so fast. The cops put the child in a Wayne County Child Protective Services foster home. They hated to do it but they “had to follow procedure.” County officials kept him there for three days. They hated to do it, but they “had to follow procedure.” Next, a judge ruled that the child could go home to his mom, but only if his dad left the house and checked into a hotel. The judge hated to do it but he “had to follow procedure.”

After two weeks, the family finally was reunited.

In telling this story on a radio news program, Scott Simon observed that, “procedures may be dumb, but they spare you from thinking...And to be fair, procedures are often imposed because previous officials have been lax and let a child go back to an abusive household.”

“The Bath”

Christine Jabbari began her 53rd day teaching kindergarten at Chicago’s Joyce Kilmer Elementary School with a clear lesson plan. She opened the thick white binder on her desk to “Day: 53.” Twenty-six thousand other Chicago teachers had identical binders, crammed with goals, conversation starters, and step-by-step questions. What Ms. Jabbari saw was this:

Script for Day: 053

TITLE: Reading and enjoying literature/words with “b”

TEXT: The Bath

LECTURE: Assemble students on the rug or reading area...Give students a warning about the dangers of hot water....Say, “Listen very quietly as I read the story.”...Say, “Think of other pictures that make the same sound as the sound bath begins with.”...

There followed a list of 75 instructions for teaching “The Bath”

No “Jazz” Allowed

Donna Moffett taught first grade at a public school in Brooklyn, New York. At forty-six, full of idealism and enthusiasm, she abandoned her \$60,000-a-year job as a legal secretary to earn \$37,000 teaching in one of New York’s most troubled schools. When she began her “literacy block” at 11:58 one Wednesday in May, she opened the textbook to Section 1, “Pets Are Special Animals.” Her mentor, veteran teacher Marie Buchanan, was sitting in. When Ms. Moffett got to a line about a boy mischievously drawing on a table, she playfully noted, “Just like some students in here.” Mrs. Buchanan frowned. “You don’t have to say that.” When Ms. Moffett turned to a page that suggested

an art project related to the story and started passing out paper, Ms. Buchanan commented: “You’re not going to have time to complete that.” After the lesson, Ms. Buchanan pulled her aside. “You have to prepare for these lessons and closely follow your teacher’s guide. We’re going to do this again tomorrow, and you’re not going to wing it.”

The teacher’s manual Ms. Moffett was using (which included an actual script and specified the time to spend on each activity, from thirty seconds to forty minutes) was also being used in hundreds of schools nationwide and was required in New York’s low-performing schools. The manual’s fixed routines and careful instructions are sometimes helpful to novice teachers; they can act as training wheels on a bicycle, helping them keep their balance when they first start teaching in the chaotic environment of an inner-city public school. But this is not what Ms. Moffitt thought she was signing up for when she switched careers. When she applied to the teaching program in New York she wrote: “I want to manage a classroom where children experience the thrill of wonder, the joy of creativity and the rewards of working hard. My objective is to convey to children in their formative years the sheer pleasure in learning.” But that’s not what she got.

The New York Board of Education required teachers in low-performing schools to follow a rigid curriculum, and this is common in many school systems. In some systems, teachers’ annual evaluations, and even pay, are based on their students’ performance on standardized tests (the scripted curricula are written to prepare students to pass these tests). In other systems, the kind of micromonitoring of teacher behavior that Ms. Buchanan was doing as a temporary mentor is permanently built into the system. School administrators observe teachers, armed with a generic checklist applicable to all subjects, all grade levels, all children, and all teachers. An hour’s teaching is broken down into several dozen observable, measurable behaviors. To ensure that all teachers know a variety of “positive verbal responses,” teachers are supplied with a list of one hundred approved “praise words.”

Standardized scripted curricula are tied directly to standardized tests, which are the most common measure of educational progress. These tests are high stakes, in that schools and teachers are rewarded (more money) or punished (funds denied, schools closed, staff dismissed or reassigned) based on student test performance. Most states have such systems and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required all states to administer standardized reading and math tests in third and eighth grade. School systems risk losing federal funding if students consistently fail to meet the standards. Standardized tests gave birth to standardized, scripted curricula. If schools and teachers would be rated, funded, and paid based on student test performance, it made sense to mandate that teachers use materials explicitly designed so that students could pass the tests.

Supporters of this approach to education were not out to undermine the engagement, creativity, and energy of good teachers. The scripted curricula and tests were aimed at improving the performance of weak teachers in failing schools—or forcing them out. If lesson plans were tied to tests, teachers’ scripts would tell them what to do to get the students ready. If students still failed, the teachers could be “held accountable.” Equality would seemingly be achieved by using the same script, thus giving the same education to all students. But this also meant that all teachers, novice or expert, weak or strong, would be required to follow the standardized system.

Teachers on the front lines often point to the considerations left out of the teach-to-test paradigm pointing out that at best, these tests are only one indicator of student learning. But one of the chief criticisms many teachers make is that the system is “dumbing down” their teaching. It is de-skilling them. It is not allowing them to use their judgment, nor is it helping them to develop the judgment they need to teach well. They are encouraged, says education scholar Linda Darling-Hammond, “to present material that [is] beyond the grasp of some and below the grasp of others, to sacrifice students’ internal motivations and interests in the cause of ‘covering the curriculum,’ and to forgo the teachable moment, when students [are] ready and eager to learn, because it [happens] to fall outside of the prescribed sequence of activities.” Sooner or later, “turning out” kids who can turn out the right answers the way you turn out screws, or hubcaps, comes to seem like normal practice. Worse, it comes to seem like “best practice.”

Wisdom is learned, but it can’t be taught—at least not didactically. That is, to become wise, people must try, fail, learn from their failures, and try again. Rules are designed to prevent mistakes, and rightly so; some kinds of mistakes must be prevented. But the price that is paid for too many rules is that they deprive people of the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, which in turn undermines the ability to improvise—to find solutions to problems that rules cover imperfectly, or not at all. The appeal to “sticks”—to rules—is a war against mistakes (trial and error), against discretion, against judgment. And it is self-perpetuating: the more you take wise judgment out of practices, the less wise practitioners become. Either it drives the wisdom out of practitioners, or it drives the wise practitioners out of the practice.

Incentives and the War on Moral Will

If not rules, then what? The answer, increasingly, is incentives. Design a smart system of rewards so that people do well by doing good. Yes, people already have one reason for doing their jobs well—their commitment as professionals. Giving them a second, financial reason can only enhance their effort and commitment. It's only logical.

Fines as Prices

Logical, perhaps; psychological, no. For forty years, psychologists and economists have been studying this seemingly logical assumption empirically, and finding that it doesn't hold. Adding financial incentives to situations in which people are motivated to work hard and well without them seems to undermine rather than enhance the motives people already have. Economist Bruno Frey calls it "motivational crowding out." Psychologists Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, and Mark Lepper talk about how "extrinsic" motivation, like the pursuit of money, undermines "intrinsic" motivation.

Here's an example. An Israeli day care center was faced with a problem: more and more parents were coming late—after closing—to pick up their kids. Since the day care center couldn't very well lock up and leave toddlers sitting alone on the steps awaiting their errant parents, they were stuck. Exhortation to come on time did not have the desired effect, so the day care center resorted to a fine for lateness. Now, parents would have two reasons to come on time. It was their obligation, and they would pay a fine for failing to meet that obligation.

But the day care center was in for a surprise. When they imposed a fine for lateness, lateness increased. Prior to the imposition of a fine, about 25% of parents came late. When the fine was introduced, the percentage of latecomers rose, to about 33%. As the fines continued, the percentage of latecomers continued to go up, reaching about 40% by the 16th week.

Why did the fines have this paradoxical effect? To many of the parents, it seemed that a fine was just a price (indeed, that was the title of the article reporting this finding). We know that a fine is not a price. A price is what you pay for a service or a good. It's an exchange between willing participants. A fine, in contrast, is punishment for a transgression. A \$25 parking ticket is not the price for parking; it's the penalty for parking where parking is not permitted. But there is nothing to stop people from interpreting a fine as a price. If it costs you \$30 to park in a downtown garage, you might well calculate that it's cheaper to park illegally on the street. Any notion of moral sanction is lost. You're not doing the "wrong" thing; you're doing the economical thing. And to get you to stop, we'll have to make the fine (price) for parking illegally higher than the price for parking in a garage.

That's exactly what happened in the day care centers. Prior to the imposition of fines, parents knew it was wrong to come late. Obviously, many of the parents did not regard this transgression as serious enough to get them to stop committing it, but there was no question that what they were doing was wrong. But when fines were introduced, the moral dimension of their behavior disappeared. It was now a straightforward financial calculation. "They're giving me permission to be late. Is it worth \$25? Is that a good price to pay to let me stay in the office a few minutes longer? Sure is!" The fine allows parents to reframe their behavior as an exchange of a fee (the "fine") for a "service" (15 minutes of extra care). The fines demoralized what had previously been a moral act. And this is what incentives can do in general. They can change the question in people's minds from "Is this right or wrong?" to "Is this worth the price?"

Once lost, this moral dimension is hard to recover. When, near the end of the study, the fines for lateness were discontinued, lateness became even more prevalent. By the end of the study, the incidence of lateness had almost doubled. It's as though the introduction of fines permanently altered parents' framing of the situation from a moral transaction to an economic one. When the fines were lifted, lateness simply became a better deal.

Bubble Kids

Ms. Dewey teaches third grade at an elementary School in Texas. Many of the students are economically disadvantaged and most are Hispanic—longtime residents of Texas as well as first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants. The school principal wants to get the test scores up. So do the teachers. Scores on these high-stakes tests are the metric of evaluation under the Texas Accountability System. Since 1992, Beck Elementary has been doing okay, but only okay. The state rates it "acceptable," but the administration and most of the teachers are anxious to achieve the more prestigious "recognized" status, which requires that more than 80 percent of the students pass the state tests. The system is, in the words of administrators, "data driven," and there is only one kind of data that ensures officially sanctioned success: scores on a standardized test. All third-grade students must pass the reading test to move on to fourth grade. The teachers regularly administer "practice" tests throughout the year. The goal is to get 80 percent of the students to pass the test, moving the school from "acceptable" to "recognized."

Ms. Dewey, a twenty-year-veteran, listens as a consultant hired by the district explains how to use the data from practice tests:

Using the data, you can identify and focus on the kids who are close to passing. The bubble kids. And focus on the kids that count—the ones that show up after October

won't count toward the school's test scores this year. Because you don't have enough special education students to disaggregate scores for that group, don't worry about them either.

To make this concept tangible for teachers, the consultant passes out markers in three colors: green, yellow, and red.

Take out your classes' latest benchmark scores, and divide your students into three groups. Color the "safe cases," or kids who will definitely pass, green. Now, here's the most important part: identify the kids who are "suitable cases for treatment." Those are the ones who can pass with a little extra help. Color them yellow. Then, color the kids who have no chance of passing this year and the kids that don't count—the "hopeless cases"—red. You should focus your attention on the yellow kids, the bubble kids. They'll give you the biggest return on your investment.

Focus on the bubble kids. Tutor only these students. Pay more attention to them in class. This is what most of Ms. Dewey's colleagues have been doing, and test scores have gone up. The community is proud, and the principal has been anointed one of the most promising educational leaders in the state. At every faculty meeting, the principal presents a "league table," ranking teachers by the percentage of their students passing the latest benchmark test. And the table makes perfect fodder for faculty room gossip: "Did you see who was at the bottom of the table this month?"

Ms. Dewey has made compromises, both large and small, throughout her career. Every educator who's in it for the long haul must. But this institutionalized policy weighs heavily. Should she really focus only on Brittney, Julian, Shennell, Tiffany, George, and Marlena—the so-called bubble kids—to the exclusion of the other seventeen students in her class? Should Ms. Dewey refuse to tutor Anthony, a persistent and eager little boy with no chance of passing the state test this year, so that she can spend time with students who have a better shot at passing? What should she tell Celine, a precocious student, whose mother wants Ms. Dewey to review her entry for an essay contest? Celine will certainly pass the state test, so can Ms. Dewey afford the time? What about the five students who moved into the school in the middle of the year? Since they don't count toward the school's scores, should Mrs. Dewey worry about their performance at all?

In her angrier moments, Ms. Dewey pledges to ignore this test-centered approach and to teach as she always has, the best way she knows how. Yet, if she does, Ms. Dewey risks being denounced as a traitor to the school's effort to increase scores. This is what stings the most.

Increasingly in the U.S., with “accountability” in the air, all kinds of significant consequences hang on the performance of kids on “big tests.” Principals and teachers can be promoted or fired. Significant pay raises and bonuses can be awarded. Entire schools can be closed. This incentivizing of what teachers do has led to practices like focusing on the “bubble kids,” teaching to the test, and in several different cities in the U.S., outright cheating, as teachers, working stealthily in the dark of night, change student answers on the big tests from wrong to right. Is this why anyone entered the teaching profession? Is this the way we want our teachers to operate?

War on Wisdom: Summary

What we have seen in these examples is that in order to make things work better, policy makers focus on more and better rules, and more and smarter incentives. These efforts are doomed to fail. Rules are the enemy of developing the skilled judgment that professionals need, and incentives are the enemy of the motivation to do the right thing because it’s the right thing. In other words, rules and incentives are the enemies of practical wisdom. And the more we rely on them, the more we will drive wisdom out of professional practices. I’ve chosen most of my examples from education, but similar examples can be found throughout the professions. The tools we use to make things better create a downward spiral that ultimately makes them worse.

How to Nurture Wisdom

So what are we to do about the war on wisdom? How can we defend wisdom in our professions? First, we need to appreciate the importance of wisdom. We have to be able to show the people we train and supervise what it is and why it is critical to be being a good professional. We can’t serve others well unless we have moral expertise and the moral will—the motivation—to use it. Second, we need to figure out how to nurture wisdom instead of undermining it. As teachers of teachers, doctors, or lawyers, we need to relinquish some control, and allow the people we supervise to take initiative, and even make mistakes. Third, we need to resist the current temptation to confront every problem by reaching into our tool kit and pulling out carrots or sticks. Incentives and rules can change behavior, but they risk corrupting our moral skill and moral will. There is a final thing. We need to remoralize the work that we do. We must remind people of the aim, the telos or our organizations, and we must embody that telos in our everyday practices.

How do we do these things?

First, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of moral exemplars. Stories, both fictional and about real people, can serve as these moral exemplars, providing prototypes that motivate and guide us. When we want to do work well, we have in our minds an image of what work well done looks like, and importantly, an image of what a good professional looks like. It could be an exemplary figure from fiction. It could be exemplary figures from history. What prototypes like this do is remind us that we are engaged in a moral activity. Sure, there are many technical skills to be mastered by doctors, lawyers, teachers, and even hospital janitors. But good doctoring, lawyering, teaching, and hospital maintenance takes more. In devoting themselves fully to the ever-growing body of technical detail that must be mastered, training programs have inadvertently demoralized their professions. Aspirational exemplars can remoralize them. These prototypes embody what a particular calling or a vocation is. In wanting to be like these exemplars, we want to be the good teacher or nurse or lawyer. We don't want it for the money. And we don't want it because we fear punishment if we break the rules.

Second, we must change the way we train the next generation of professionals, making sure that the opportunity to develop wise judgment is a part of everything they do. Of course, these students must also develop a wide range of technical skills. But technical skills will never be enough to get us the teachers, doctors, and lawyers we want and need. The development of wise judgment probably requires more mentoring and less didactic instruction, more willingness to let students make mistakes and learn from them, more encouragement for them to take initiative, and more encouragement for them to take the perspective of the patients, clients, and students with whom they work. None of this will be easy. But if we want professional services we are proud of, not disappointed in, I don't see an alternative.

[For Further Reading](#)

As I said at the beginning of this article, the story I have to tell is complex and an article this size can't do it justice. For those who want to read and think more about this, I suggest the following books and articles (my book with Kenneth Sharpe lays out the arguments in this paper in much greater detail and with many more examples, so it's a good place to start):

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