



Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

October – December 2023

Wisdom & Work-life Balance

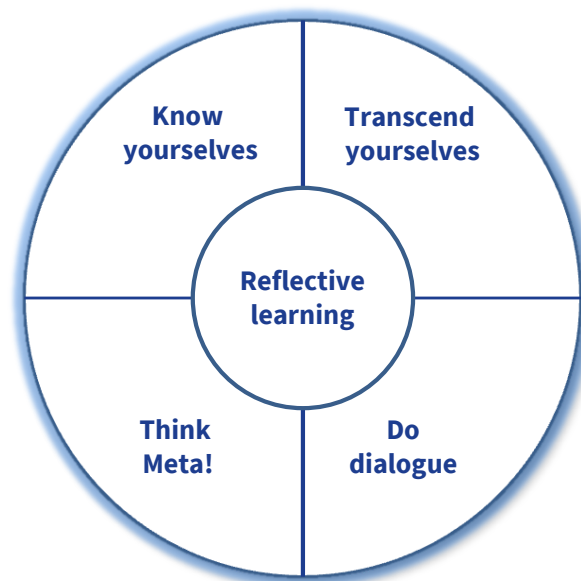


Introduction

Many leaders are struggling to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance. The challenge has exacerbated over the last few years, first during COVID, and now as organisations navigate economic uncertainty. There are lots of resources out there to help us manage our time differently but these resources don't always help.

In this paper we will outline a different approach to achieving our desired work-life balance. This approach is based on the five mantras of wise leadership outlined in [earlier QRLs](#) and the book [Wise Leader](#). First let's recap the five mantras.

- **Commit to reflective learning** sits at the heart of the model. In QRL 6 we explained how wise leaders are not only committed to reflection, but they reflect differently.
- In **Know yourselves** (QRL 2) we explored the idea of multiplicity. A multiplicity perspective enables us to develop a more profound sense of self awareness – or *selves awareness*.
- In **Transcend yourselves** (QRL 3) we considered our capacity to stand above ourselves and observe ourselves in relationship with others, accessing new ways of looking at the world.
- In **Think Meta!** (QRL 4) we described different ways of thinking about systems and change, detailing the meta-perspective and its focus on emergence and influence.
- In **Do dialogue** (QRL 5) we built on how wise leaders *think* about change, focusing on how they *do* change.



The Challenge

Lucy is working 60 hours a week plus weekends. She gets up at seven, is at work by eight and leaves the office at six. When she gets home she feeds the children, helps them with their homework and puts them to bed by nine. Then she gets back on her computer and does a couple more hours work before falling asleep around eleven thirty. She tries hard to keep weekends free, but sometimes she simply *has* to work Saturday/Sunday mornings just to clear the backlog.

Someone at work suggested she watched a sequence of podcasts by an expert in time management. He explained how best to structure her email, her work files, and the benefits of working in bursts, taking short breaks in between. She found the podcasts useful, once she found time to watch them, and for a while the pressures on her time eased. But it didn't take long before she was back to old habits.

She then worked with a coach, who encouraged her to think about her 'big rocks'. To think about what was important, what was urgent, and to be crystal clear about what she needed to achieve in a day or a week and what could be put aside. He talked also about delegation and recognising when she needed more resource. This all made sense, but Lucy simply couldn't find the time to stop and think about her priorities. She committed to make time at the beginning of the week to work out her priorities and at the end of the week to learn from the events of that week in service of getting better at prioritising. But those commitments never lasted more than a couple of weeks.

Her coach then suggested she focus on 'saying no'. She would never be able to manage her time better, he said, unless she started pushing back on some of the requests on her time. He shared with her frameworks for saying no, ways to decline taking on more work without being confrontational or disrespectful. Those models made sense too, logically, but were hard to put into practice. It didn't matter how hard she tried to explain to her bosses that she was at capacity – no – beyond capacity – they just shrugged and told her that sometimes things just needed to get done. Everyone was working hard – couldn't she see?

Lucy is stuck.

This is a common story. In it we can see Lucy journey through three different approaches to trying to recreate her workload (Figure 1).

First, Lucy is encouraged to work more *efficiently*. This requires her to manage her time better. She might organise her emails differently, do something to get rid of the 1,000 emails currently sitting in her inbox. Or she might manage her attendance at meetings differently, delegate attendance to some of her team, decline to attend meetings she doesn't believe she needs to be at.

Second, Lucy is encouraged to work more *effectively*. If you try and do everything required of you, then you will inevitably end up filling every available hour. In today's world there will always be more demands on your time than you have time to work on those demands. Which means you have to decide how much of your time you will dedicate to work and make decisions as to how best use that time. If others demand you do more than you have time to do, then you must explain that you will need more resources to get the extra work done, otherwise the work cannot be done. Which all demands of us that we establish appropriate criteria to make good decisions on how we best prioritise.

This is all very logical so far, but there's something else going on too, otherwise managing our work-life balance would be relatively straightforward. The third factor is *mindset* – meaning the way we look at the world and make sense of the world. Lucy might be very efficient and very able to prioritise her time, but still she finds herself working 60 hours a week. Why?

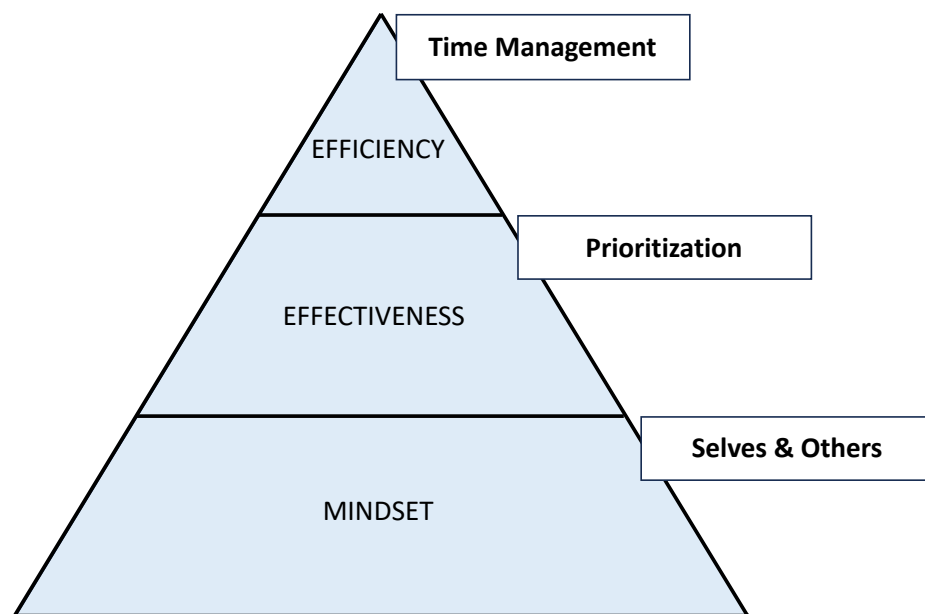


Figure 1 – Three lenses on achieving work-life balance

We can think of our mindset as a set of filters, the way that we look at the world and make sense of events. Here are a selection of mindsets we come across in our work with leaders, mindsets that Lucy may or may not be subject to:

'People pleaser', who doesn't want to say no to people when they ask her to take on new work because she doesn't want to upset people or to damage relationships. Nor does she want to delegate too much work to her direct reports, because they may resent it and want to leave her team.

'People protector', who doesn't want to delegate because she wants her team to be happy and have a great work-life balance. She sees that as her responsibility and will do whatever

is required to protect her direct reports from the kind of pressures she is experiencing herself.

'FOMO self', who doesn't want to turn down any piece of work that looks interesting. This might be a great opportunity to generate new revenue, to build new client relationships, or to make a good impression on important internal stakeholders.

These are just a few examples of the mindsets we come across in helping people find a different way of working.

So far we have focussed on specific internal mindsets, aspects of our selves (Figure 2). Mindset is not just about looking within our *selves*, however. It is also about taking a balcony view on the way that our *organization* works. What are some of the unwritten rules inside my organization? What are some of the collective beliefs I may need to navigate if I am to achieve the work-life balance I am seeking? Beliefs such *'what the client asks for, the client gets'*, or *'you just gotta be tough'*, or *'in this industry [insert name] you gotta work long hours to get ahead'*. To navigate these beliefs I need to understand them and I need to think how best to influence some of the senior stakeholders who most advocate those beliefs.

I may also need to reflect more broadly, adopt a more societal perspective. That may require considering beliefs and experiences that do represent my industry, or my local area, or even my country. It may be true that most people in professional services, for example, share similar beliefs around meeting customer needs. It may be that many people in my city or state are living by a common doctrine encouraging us all to work especially hard through a hardship or crisis. It may be that I can identify a national propensity for working long hours. Again, how will I navigate those expectations?

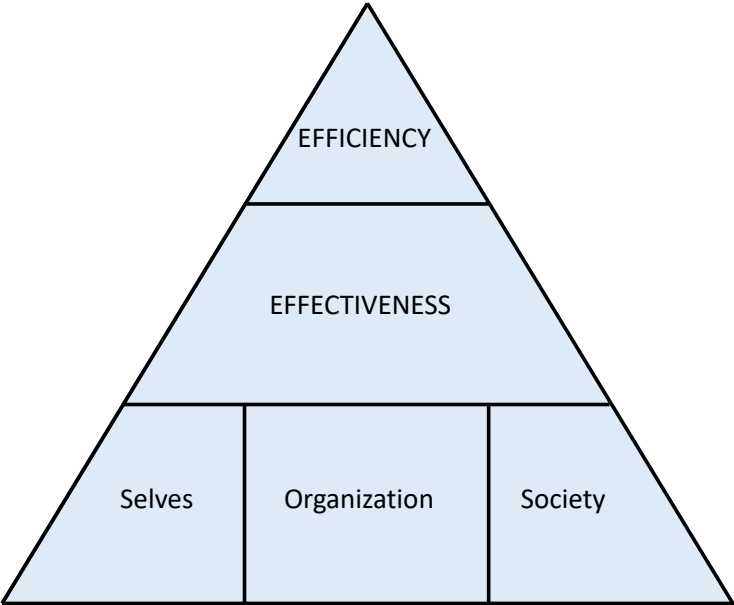


Figure 2 – Different aspects of mindset

Mindset and Wisdom

To manage our work-life balance better may require us to become wiser. It may require us to achieve a new level of 'selves-transcendence', the third mantra from *Wise Leader*. From that level of transcendence I see myself clearly as one actor taking part in a play with many other actors. I see my different selves clearly, recognising how different parts of me get in my way at times, and help me at other times. I see others similarly. I can sense how they make sense of the world and how they show up differently in different situations and contexts. I become more aware as to how I might interact most effectively with those people, how to better influence and engage.

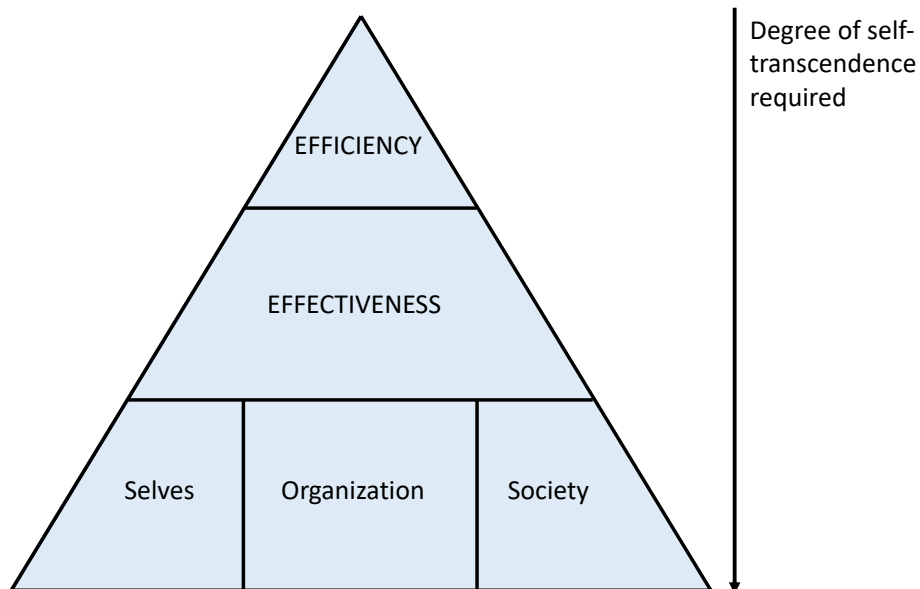
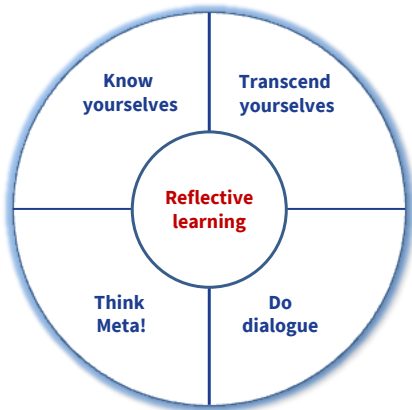


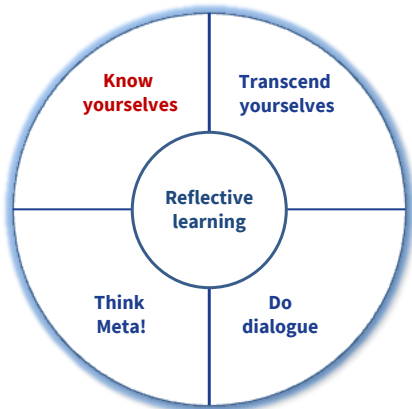
Figure 3 – Mindset and Wisdom

But how do we achieve that state of selves transcendence, and how do we to recognise when we are operating in that space?

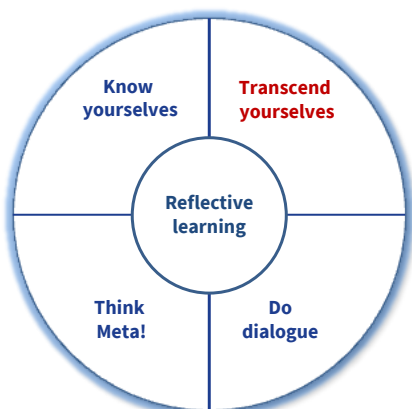
Next we consider the five mantras from *Wise Leader* and insights to be gained from each.



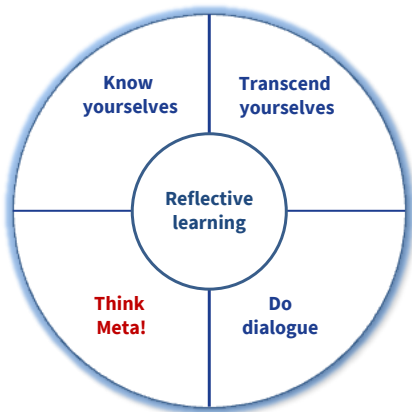
To become wiser demands that we make time to reflect. That reflection time is not something to do if and when we have done everything else we need to do. It is something we always make time for. It is something we learn to do in-the-moment. Our research shows that wise leaders don't only reflect more often – they reflect *differently*. They reflect on self, not just on everything happening in the outside world. They reflect on what next, not just what's hard in the present. And perhaps most important, they reflect with other people, sharing experiences and insights and learning from each other.



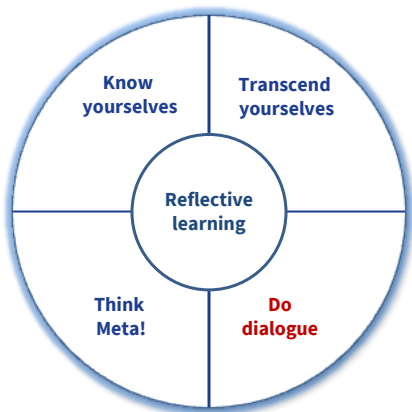
To become wiser requires us to explore and understand those different parts of our selves that may be pulling us in different directions. I must identify my *people pleaser* self, my *people protector* self, my *FOMO* self etc ... and learn to appreciate and understand them all. My *people pleaser* self, for example, may help me tune into other's needs but doesn't help me manage my time. I need to understand every aspect of my self and encourage those parts of me to get to know each other and work together more effectively.



Making the time to reflect and to become more aware of our selves sets up well to achieve new levels of selves transcendence. To reach that balcony further requires me to explore the origins of each of my selves, to understand how those selves were and continue to be shaped through my interactions with others. This enables me to understand how I may be feeling pressured by others to do what I don't really want to do, and to understand how to better engage with those people, addressing the needs and beliefs of *their* various selves.



From the balcony I have a broader perspective. But how do I make sense of the world from this lofty vantage point? What I focus on depends on how I think about change. Through my commitment to reflective learning I gain access to new ways of thinking about change, including the meta perspective. The meta perspective helps me understand I don't get to control anything as a leader, but I do get to influence. I must explore how my social networks operate, understand who are my key stakeholders and make time to engage with them most effectively.



To engage with those stakeholders most effectively will require me to get better at dialogue. Dialogue is a particular form of conversation. When I am engaged in dialogue I am able to hold all my convictions, beliefs, and prejudices at arms length in service of truly understanding the person I am talking to. And I say what needs to be said – respectfully, again managing all the voices in my head that may be feeling annoyed, upset and judgmental.

In conclusion

Those leaders who do have great work-life balance:

- Make time to reflect and learn, with others
- Have greater levels of selves awareness
- Are able to transcend the day-to-day emotional hurly burly of the workplace
- Understand how best to influence and change
- Can relate to others in ways others find difficult

Enabling others to grow in this space won't be achieved only by offering new frameworks and models and new skills. We must also create the space for people to consider new ways of thinking. To help people do things differently often starts with thinking about how they think. We won't always achieve this individual by individual. We work with some organisations where we sense whole levels of leadership struggling with workload, whilst simultaneously contributing to the narrative that makes that so difficult. To enable individual change requires organizational change which requires making the space for people to think differently *together*.

If this sounds like something to explore further we offer more practical guidance for leaders and leadership developers alike in [The Wise Leader](#).

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On behalf of Leading Systemically

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