How wisdom helps with success in projects and making progress with a program[1]

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores wisdom as a practical set of competencies that support mental health, resilience, leadership, and effective behavior in life, projects, and programs. Building on psychological research by Kai Baumann and Michael Linden on wisdom competencies and wisdom therapy, the paper connects concepts from psychology, philosophy, emotional intelligence, leadership, and project and program management to explain how wisdom can help individuals survive and thrive in complex and uncertain environments.

Design / Methodology / Approach

The paper is a conceptual and reflective synthesis combining insights from psychology, philosophy, leadership theory, and practical experience in projects and organizational transformation. The discussion is structured around 10 wisdom competencies identified by Baumann and Linden. The author complements these concepts with examples from leadership practice, project and program management, cultural observations, and philosophical traditions.

Findings

The paper argues that wisdom is not merely accumulated knowledge or age-related experience, but a combination of emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and ethical competencies that can be consciously developed. The ten competencies contribute to resilience, adaptability, better decision-making, healthier relationships, and more effective leadership. The paper further suggests that these competencies become increasingly important in modern project and program environments characterized by uncertainty, complexity, cultural diversity, stakeholder conflict, and continuous change.

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Practical Implications

The paper provides readers with a practical framework for self-reflection and personal development. It encourages individuals to assess their own wisdom competencies, seek external feedback, and deliberately strengthen areas such as emotional regulation, empathy, humility, and tolerance for ambiguity. The competencies are presented as particularly relevant for leaders managing complex projects, programs, and organizational transformations.

Originality / Value

The paper uniquely combines psychological wisdom therapy with perspectives on leadership and project/program management. It presents wisdom as a trainable, applicable competency model that links mental well-being, resilience, ethical leadership, and practical problem-solving across both personal and professional life.

1. Introduction

This paper refocuses a 2023 paper, 'How wisdom helps to live a good life4' (Walenta, 2023), on project management. The question is how the ten competencies of wisdom apply to project management and program management, and can be used to make projects more successful, and programs deliver more benefits.

Research published in German by psychologists from the renowned Berlin Charite Hospital addresses how to treat mental illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder, and suicidal thoughts (Baumann & Linden, 2009). In their work, they identify a set of ten competencies related to the goals of standard psychological therapies, which they collectively call wisdom. Wisdom helps you stay mentally healthy and live a good life.

These ten competencies are not new to the development of human maturity or leadership, and in their book, they are grouped under the label of wisdom. However, a lack of any one of them can lead to mental weakness, illness, suffering, and problems in life or in projects. The ability to survive, or even thrive, when we experience disruptions to our projects and programs is sometimes called resilience (survive) or anti-fragility (strive, a term coined by Nassim Nicolas Taleb).

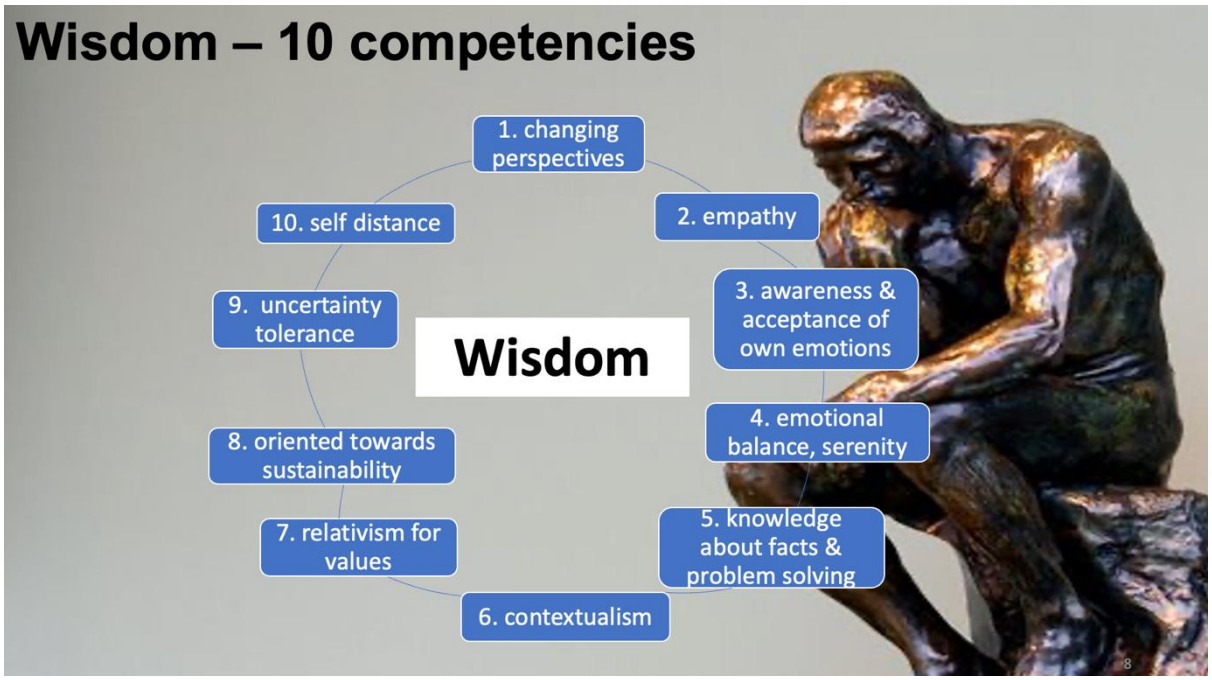
To be very clear: if you experience signs of mental instability or illness, thoughts of depression or burnout, you should contact professional help. Sometimes we do not recognize our weaknesses due to our blind spots. At such times, others can see us more clearly, though they might hesitate to share their observations with us out of fear of our reaction. What helps in these cases is to talk with a mentor, a trusted person who is not much involved in our daily lives and can objectively help us to become more self-aware.

Wisdom is the common goal we all strive for in life

Wikipedia defines Wisdom as '.. ability to contemplate and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight' and Baltes, a psychology researcher, said wisdom is '.. expert knowledge concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life.' The keywords are pragmatics and common sense. These describe ways to solve problems in reality, not only in theory.

Philosophers like Aristotle thought about wisdom too. He defined *phronesis* as a quality for moral understanding, leading to good results and well living. Phronesis means to have the ability to make morally good judgments and decisions. As Winch and Hajikazemi (2025) put it, "The concept of phron´esis – usually translated as practical wisdom – was developed by Aristotle in contrast to both scientific knowledge (epistˆemˆe) and technical artistry (techn^e).", they conclude "Wisdom ... is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate; for we say that it is especially the task of a wise man to deliberate well.".

Indeed, we all appreciate working with a leader or a project manager with high wisdom. And most of us recognize wisdom when we see it, yet there are misconceptions. Wisdom is often seen as a feature of elderly and experienced people. But young people can also display wisdom. Acquired knowledge, often mistakenly seen as synonym to wisdom, is in fact but one of the 10 competencies (knowledge about facts, assimilation).



2. Ability to **change perspectives**

In our frequently bipolar world, we often get trapped in a single viewpoint, opinion, mindset, or leadership approach. We tend to strongly align with one perspective and emotionally dismiss opposing ones, which can sometimes lead to hostility or conflict. However, reality is seldom binary. Bipolar mental frameworks are among the simplest ways to interpret the world, but most complex situations encompass numerous valid perspectives simultaneously. Even shifting from a bipolar to a tri-polar view can reduce emotional rigidity and improve decision-making, illustrating the constructive power of trichotomy. Examples include democratic systems with three balancing powers (trias politica), the Christian concept of the Trinity, and the idea that human decisions are best guided by heart, head, and gut together. A three-legged chair is inherently stable because it balances tension across multiple points.

Changing perspectives means searching for, recognizing, and adopting alternative viewpoints on a subject. Human history offers many examples of the value of this ability. Alexander the Great solved the Gordian knot not by untying it conventionally but by cutting it with his sword. King Solomon became famous for solutions that transcended opposing positions. Wicked problems often require reframing rather than linear problem-solving.

Psychological reframing techniques also help people view situations through different "windows," helping them break out of rigid thinking patterns. Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats method formalizes this process by assigning distinct roles and viewpoints to stimulate broader understanding. Related competencies include cognitive flexibility and mental fluidity.

This capability is highly relevant to projects and programs. Complex projects frequently fail because teams, sponsors, users, engineers, policymakers, and stakeholders each define success differently. Effective project and program leaders must therefore shift perspectives continuously: between strategy and operations, short-term delivery and long-term benefits, technical and human concerns, risk and opportunity, and governance and innovation. Large programs especially require integrating conflicting stakeholder interests rather than optimizing a single viewpoint. Perspective shifting also supports better change management, stakeholder engagement, conflict resolution, innovation, and adaptive decision-making under uncertainty.

The good news is that perspective-taking can be learned and strengthened. Role play, intercultural experiences, exposure to diverse viewpoints, brainstorming, and collaborative problem-solving all help develop this competency. Embracing diversity and tolerating pluralism are therefore not just social virtues, but essential capabilities for leadership in complex project and program environments.

In projects, perspective shifting is usually more operational and problem-oriented. Project managers need to move between viewpoints such as technical versus business requirements, cost versus quality, speed versus risk, or user needs versus engineering constraints. They often act as translators between specialists who each see the project through their own professional lens. Changing perspectives in projects therefore helps improve collaboration, decision-making, conflict resolution, and practical delivery. For example, a software implementation project may require understanding the perspectives of developers, users, finance teams, cybersecurity experts, and executives simultaneously. The goal is typically to deliver a defined result successfully despite differing priorities, which then often becomes the dominant perspective, inhibiting new ideas.

In programs, perspective shifting becomes much broader, more political, and more strategic. Programs usually involve multiple projects, organizational transformation, behavioral change, long time horizons, and many stakeholder groups with competing interests and definitions of success. Program leaders must continuously move between perspectives such as strategy versus operations, local versus system-wide optimization, short-term pressures versus long-term benefits, governance versus innovation, and organizational versus societal impacts. Unlike projects, where perspectives often concern delivery trade-offs, programs must reconcile fundamentally different worldviews and motivations.

Programs also operate in environments that are more uncertain and evolving. As circumstances change, leaders may need to repeatedly reframe the entire program itself. A perspective that was useful at the start may later become limiting. This makes cognitive flexibility, reframing, and pluralistic thinking especially critical in program management.

In simple terms, projects require perspective shifting mainly to coordinate delivery, while programs require perspective shifting to enable transformation and strategic alignment across complex systems. The larger and more complex the initiative, the more essential the competency becomes.

> ***There are no facts, only interpretations (Nietzsche)***

3. **Empathy**, the ability to connect

Understanding others in their motivations, current state of mind, emotions, and mindsets is a prerequisite to be heard, establishing trust and influencing others. For example, do not try to sell a car to someone who has just lost a loved-one. Techniques like active listening can be learned, they include refraining from sharing your opinion but focus on what is being said by the other. Asking questions about their statements, clarifying, or taking a deeper dive. Analyzing statements along the four-beads model,

what does the message convey about content, relationship, self-disclosure and appeal? Looking at the mimic and body language and building rapport thru mirroring, which a technique from NLP.

Empathy can also be experienced without rational analysis; it is feeling with others. Mothers can feel the stitch if their baby is hurt. You start feeling touched if you watch a romantic movie. Or you show emotional signs of relief if a hero survives an unsurmountable challenge.

You focus outside yourself and see the other as a human and become aware of the difference to yourself. Then you connect with the other.

Empathy plays an important role in both projects and programs, but its nature, scope, and strategic importance differ significantly.

In projects, empathy is primarily important for collaboration, communication, and delivery effectiveness. Project managers work closely with team members, users, suppliers, and sponsors who may experience stress, uncertainty, competing priorities, or resistance. Empathy helps leaders understand stakeholders' motivations, emotions, and concerns, enabling them to build trust, reduce misunderstandings, and improve cooperation. For example, understanding why users resist a new system may help a project team adapt training, communication, or implementation timing. In projects, empathy is often applied at the interpersonal and team level. It supports active listening, conflict resolution, negotiation, stakeholder management, and day-to-day leadership effectiveness.

In programs, empathy becomes broader, deeper, and more strategic because programs typically involve organizational transformation, behavioral change, political interests, and long-term uncertainty. Program leaders must empathize not only with individuals, but also with groups, cultures, institutions, and communities that may experience change very differently. Different stakeholders may simultaneously feel excitement, fear, loss, opportunity, resistance, or fatigue. Unlike projects, where empathy mainly supports delivery, in programs empathy becomes essential for enabling sustainable change and maintaining stakeholder alignment over time.

Programs also often involve conflicting perceptions of success. A transformation that benefits senior leadership may create anxiety among operational staff, while a sustainability initiative may raise economic concerns for local industries. Program leaders therefore need the ability to understand multiple emotional realities simultaneously and communicate in ways that acknowledge these differences without dismissing them.

Empathy in programs is also closely connected to change management and trust-building. People rarely support transformation simply because it is logically correct;

they support it when they feel understood, respected, and psychologically safe. This makes empathy a critical competency for influencing adoption, overcoming resistance, and sustaining engagement across complex stakeholder environments.

In simple terms, empathy in projects helps people work together effectively, while empathy in programs helps people move through change together.

When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen. (Hemingway)

4. Awareness & acceptance of own emotions (**self-awareness**)

Being self-aware leads to higher self-confidence and authenticity. It means mindfulness, awareness of your own feelings (while empathy includes awareness of the feelings of others) and is a prerequisite for self-control and emotional balance. There are many exercises to increase our self-awareness, among them living in the present, meditation, and getting feedback about our behaviors from many different people.

Also helpful is being aware of triggers for emotions like fear, anger, hate, shame, or guilt but also positive ones like crying in a movie, loving, or just being joyful. Knowing the triggers and sensing them enables us to ask, 'Do I want to allow this emotion now?'. For negative emotions, the answer of our pre-frontal cortex, our rational brain, is mostly 'NO!'. Involving our rational thinking is well achieved through questions and recommended in business and social environments. For example, nobody likes to watch temper tantrums.

Knowing about our habits and in general human biases also makes us more aware of why we judge the way we do. Read about biases and explore how much every one of them influenced your decision-making last week.

Charlie Munger, a lifelong friend of Warren Buffett, wrote good summaries about biases, and Daniel Kahneman elaborates on them in his famous book 'Thinking, Fast and Slow'.

Self-awareness is important in both projects and programs, but the scale, complexity, and consequences of a lack of self-awareness are much greater in program environments.

In projects, self-awareness primarily supports effective day-to-day leadership, communication, and decision-making. Project managers operate under pressure, deadlines, budget constraints, stakeholder expectations, and frequent uncertainty. Being aware of one's own emotions, stress reactions, communication style, biases, and behavioral triggers helps maintain emotional balance and professionalism. Self-aware project leaders are better able to regulate frustration, avoid impulsive reactions, receive feedback constructively, and build trust within teams. They are also more likely to

recognize when personal preferences or cognitive biases influence planning, risk assessments, or stakeholder interactions. In projects, self-awareness therefore contributes directly to team effectiveness, collaboration, and reliable delivery.

In programs, self-awareness becomes much more strategic because program leaders influence large-scale transformation involving multiple projects, stakeholder groups, organizational politics, and long-term uncertainty. Programs often create emotionally charged environments where resistance, ambiguity, competing interests, and power dynamics are unavoidable. Leaders who lack self-awareness may unconsciously become defensive, overly controlling, emotionally reactive, attached to a single vision, or blind to the unintended consequences of their decisions. Because programs operate over longer time horizons and involve many interconnected relationships, the emotional tone and behavioral patterns of leaders can strongly shape the culture and success of the entire transformation effort.

Program leaders, therefore, need deeper awareness not only of emotions and biases but also of their assumptions, leadership identity, motivations, fears, and impact on others. They must continuously reflect on questions such as: “Am I listening openly?”, “Am I attached to a preferred solution?”, “Am I creating psychological safety or fear?”, and “How are my reactions influencing stakeholder trust and collaboration?” Self-awareness also helps leaders tolerate ambiguity, reconsider assumptions, and adapt perspectives when circumstances change.

In simple terms, self-awareness in projects helps leaders manage themselves effectively under operational pressure, while self-awareness in programs helps leaders avoid becoming obstacles to the transformation themselves.

Without awareness, there is no improvement.

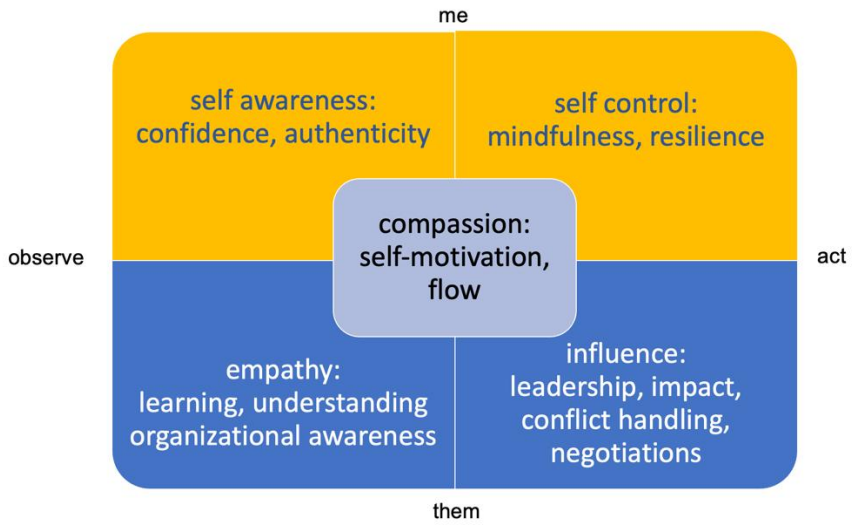
5. Emotional balance, **serenity** (self-control)

Showing patience, being peaceful and avoiding knee-jerk reactions makes you more likable and respected, but also feeds into a peace of mind. Having a mentor helps you develop and finetune this capability. Serenity makes you likable, trustworthy and a source of help for others. Since many disruptions will appear ‘controllable’ to you, with self-control, you increase your resilience.

While self-awareness is observing yourself, self-control is responding to these observations. It is to become your choice, what you do about an upcoming emotion, if you want to be influenced by others triggering or just nudging you, if you obey biases. Self-control increases your freedom and autonomy.

One tool to increase self-control is to ask yourself questions. Questions can only by processed by our 'rational brain', not by our emotional brain or limbic system. So the key is to identify the triggers that – automatically – lead to emotions and if they occur, and if you learned to sense them, ask yourself the question if you now want to have the emotion. Maybe yes, if it is positive, or no. if you understand it could be damaging.

The last three competencies empathy, self-control and self-awareness are parts of **emotional intelligence**, a concept often recommended as a prerequisite of leadership. Although the fourth component of emotional intelligence is often cited as social skills, it can be better characterized as **influence** on others. Influence (or social skills) is not one of the ten wisdom competencies. Influence is a synonym to leadership (if you lead, you influence others to follow you).



Influence or leadership without **ethics**, moral balance, and without judging the consequences, are dangerous and we see many examples of the damage done, in companies, politics and society at large. On the other hand, knowing our moral compass, human values and biases is helped by being self-aware.

Serenity can be understood as an outward expression and practical feature of self-control. While self-awareness is the ability to observe and recognize one's emotions, triggers, thoughts, and internal reactions, self-control is the ability to consciously regulate and direct those reactions. Serenity is often the visible result of this process: calmness, patience, emotional balance, and thoughtful behavior even under pressure.

In projects, serenity as a facet of self-control helps leaders stay composed amid deadlines, conflicts, technical setbacks, and stakeholder pressure. Rather than reacting impulsively or emotionally, self-controlled project leaders pause, reflect, and respond deliberately. This improves judgment, communication, and trust within teams. Calm leaders foster psychological safety, making it easier for people to discuss problems,

risks, and mistakes. Serenity, therefore, contributes directly to team stability, resilience, and effective delivery.

In programs, serenity becomes even more important because program environments are typically more ambiguous, political, and emotionally demanding. Programs involve long-term transformation, competing stakeholder interests, organizational resistance, and uncertainty that cannot always be resolved quickly. In such situations, emotionally reactive leadership can easily amplify fear, conflict, and instability across the wider system. Serenity, grounded in strong self-control, enables program leaders to absorb pressure without spreading anxiety to others. It helps them maintain perspective, tolerate ambiguity, and make balanced decisions even during crises or setbacks.

Serenity also strengthens leadership credibility. Leaders who consistently demonstrate patience, emotional balance, and thoughtful responses are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy, resilient, and dependable. This encourages collaboration and long-term stakeholder confidence, especially in difficult transformations.

Importantly, serenity does not mean passivity or emotional suppression. Rather, it reflects the conscious ability to choose constructive responses instead of automatic reactions. In this sense, serenity is not merely a personality trait but a developed leadership capability emerging from self-awareness, emotional regulation, reflection, and deliberate self-control.

In simple terms, self-awareness observes emotions, self-control manages them, and serenity is how this emotional mastery becomes visible to others.

> ***The best fighter is never angry (Lao Tzu)***

6. **Knowledge** about facts (assimilation) and problem-solving (accommodation)

Knowledge is included among the competencies of wisdom, and sometimes people confuse knowledge with wisdom.

There are at least two aspects of knowledge that psychologists use in therapy.

First, we have factual knowledge about a topic, we might be a specialist in a (often technical) topic. This is heuristic knowledge, acquired through our senses and partly stored and condensed in memory, for example as biases. The process of applying it is called assimilation; we apply known schemes to situations.

Second, if we have new situations, or topics, we use accommodation to apply our coping strategies to problems. We use our epistemic intelligence to do this (see the term

episteme explained before). To increase epistemic knowledge, we identify patterns, do experiments, and learn from the results (retrospectives, de-briefs). Gaming is a good way to develop this competency, when we identify new strategies and sense yet unknown influences.

There are many books, courses, and certifications to learn about problem-solving. The Design Thinking Double Diamond, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Diamond_(design_process_model), PMI's Wicked Problem Solving (WPS), the Kepner Tregoe method (as used in ITIL), and TRIZ (developed by Russian Genrich Altshuller) are examples of problem-solving concepts. Problems are themselves perspectives, and many problems vanish once we can apply another viewpoint (you certainly remember your GrandPa/Ma showing you another view on a problem you shared with them). Hence, it is good to understand the problem before trying to find a solution, yet we tend to jump to solutions.

Knowledge is important in both projects and programs, but the nature and application of knowledge differ significantly between the two.

In projects, knowledge is often more specialized, technical, and execution-oriented. Project teams rely heavily on factual and procedural knowledge to deliver defined results within constraints of scope, time, cost, and quality. This includes domain expertise, engineering knowledge, methods, standards, tools, and lessons learned from previous projects. In project environments, assimilation is especially important: applying known frameworks, processes, and experience to recurring situations. Project managers and specialists frequently depend on established best practices, certifications, technical competencies, and operational problem-solving approaches. Retrospectives, de-briefs, and lessons learned help teams improve future project execution by refining existing knowledge and practices.

Programs, however, operate in more complex and uncertain environments where knowledge must be broader, more adaptive, and more strategic. While technical expertise still matters, program leaders often face new, ambiguous, or "wicked" problems that cannot be solved using existing templates alone. Here, accommodation and epistemic intelligence become increasingly important: leaders must question assumptions, integrate diverse perspectives, recognize emerging patterns, and continuously adapt their understanding as the environment evolves. Programs involve multiple interconnected projects, stakeholder groups, organizational cultures, and external influences, making purely technical knowledge insufficient.

Program environments, therefore, place stronger emphasis on learning, experimentation, systems thinking, and reflective problem-solving. Techniques such as Design Thinking, retrospectives, scenario exploration, simulations, and sandbox experimentation become highly valuable because they allow leaders to safely explore

uncertainty and test alternative approaches before implementing large-scale change. Programs also require integrating knowledge across disciplines and balancing conflicting perspectives, rather than optimizing a single technical solution.

An important distinction is that projects often focus on applying knowledge efficiently, whereas programs focus more on generating new understanding and adapting continuously to complexity and change. In projects, knowledge primarily supports delivery, whereas in programs, it supports transformation, learning, and strategic adaptation.

Problems themselves are often perspective-dependent. In project environments, reframing may improve delivery efficiency; in program environments, it can fundamentally change the direction, meaning, or even the existence of the perceived problem.

> ***All of life is problem-solving (Karl Popper).***

7. **Contextualism** (consider the situation, timeline, and social relevance)

Though we have mental models and identify patterns in new situations, every situation depends on its unique circumstances, the context at which the situation arises and the social relevance. Hence, every project is unique, even if it is similar to a previous one: The same project scope might be implemented differently in different countries or industries or in summer or winter. For example, I have experienced the importance of context when rolling out ERP/SAP templates to several countries in Europe.

Being aware of this and not prematurely selecting a solution that worked in another context but considering the current dependencies of the problem builds this competency.

Context should be analyzed from several perspectives/dimensions. One of them is the timeline, a solution that worked last year, might not work now, even if the environment and stakeholders did not change.

Another dimension of context is the social context, different stakeholders and different roles may result in different politics, networks, communications, dependencies and hence influence the problem and the solution. Different cultures lead to different perceptions and behaviors. Social network diagrams, org-charts, cultural workshops and traditional stakeholder analysis are helpful tools.

And a third dimension is the factual situation: the interfaces and related components of the problem system may differ significantly, especially now that everyone perceives

VUCA and rapid technological advances. A PESTLE analysis may help to understand that dimension.

Sensitivity to context is important in both projects and programs, but the scale, complexity, and consequences of contextual misunderstanding are much greater in program environments.

In projects, contextual awareness primarily supports effective delivery and local adaptation. Even when projects appear similar, each project operates within unique technical, organizational, cultural, regulatory, and temporal circumstances. A solution that succeeded previously may fail if applied mechanically in a different context. Project leaders therefore need the ability to assess the specific environment in which the project operates, including stakeholder expectations, organizational culture, local regulations, available capabilities, timing, and operational dependencies. For example, implementing the same ERP or SAP template across different countries may require substantial adaptation because of legal requirements, cultural expectations, working styles, language, or governance structures. In projects, contextual understanding helps avoid premature solution selection and improves execution quality, stakeholder alignment, and practical usability.

In programs, contextual awareness becomes much more dynamic, systemic, and strategic. Programs operate across multiple projects, stakeholder groups, organizational units, and often across changing political, economic, social, and technological environments. Unlike projects, where context may remain relatively stable during delivery, program contexts often evolve continuously over time. Program leaders therefore need to interpret not only current conditions, but also shifting patterns, emerging dependencies, and changing stakeholder dynamics.

Programs must consider multiple contextual dimensions simultaneously. Temporal context matters because strategies that worked previously may become ineffective due to changing technologies, market conditions, regulations, or social expectations. Social context becomes especially important because programs involve complex networks of stakeholders with differing interests, power structures, cultural assumptions, and political relationships. Factual and systemic context also grows in importance as programs interact with broader ecosystems, external institutions, and interconnected systems in perceived VUCA environments.

This makes contextual intelligence a critical competency for program leadership. Program leaders must continuously reassess assumptions, adapt approaches, and recognize that transformation success depends not only on technical correctness but also on alignment with the evolving environment. Tools such as stakeholder analysis, PESTLE analysis, systems mapping, scenario planning, and cultural assessment, therefore, become more strategically important in programs than in projects.

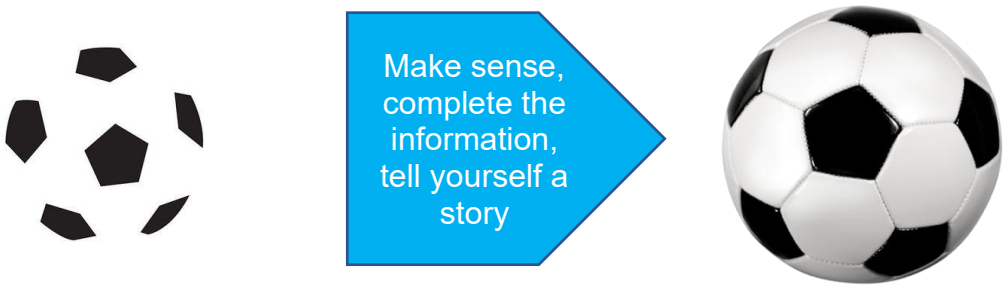
In simple terms, contextual awareness in projects helps tailor solutions to local conditions, while contextual awareness in programs helps leaders continuously adapt transformation efforts within evolving complex systems.

There is no silver bullet, and no one size fits all.

8. **Relativism for values**, tolerance for pluralism, diversity

There are many truths (non-monism), and your personal truth is just one of them. Others are entitled to their truths as you are, all are based on the cultures we live in, our beliefs and experiences, and our windows to reality. We all see only parts of the full picture and make up a full image in our minds based on our experiences, known patterns, and assumptions.

We see 6 black dots on white ground, and if you know football, your mind has completed this input to recognize a football. If not, you probably are lost seeing the image on the left.



Relativism for values enables you to accept and respect the values of others. Start with learning about other cultures.

Developing the competency of relativism for values is hard if you are part of the same belief systems – sometimes - for most of your life, like nations, churches but also – more temporary - popular political mindsets, often promoted and enshrined by propaganda (think woke-ism, LGBTQ, DEI, ESG).

Tolerance for pluralism can be enhanced by travel, intercultural networking and similar cross-community exposure. Communities differ by their defining beliefs and once you cross from one community to the other you will recognize conflicting beliefs.

How much of this conflict can you tolerate? How much do these conflicts trigger negative emotions in you? Also here, self-awareness and -control help becoming more tolerant.

One of the (many) definitions of pluralism puts it in contrast to mono-ism and dualism and claims that there are in fact many different substances in nature that constitute reality. This tolerance then means that you can live with an undetermined reality, and accept (and not fear) ambiguity and complexity.

Relativism regarding values and tolerance for pluralism are important in both projects and programs, but their significance increases substantially in program environments due to the greater diversity, ambiguity, and strategic complexity involved.

In projects, tolerance for different values and perspectives primarily supports collaboration and effective teamwork. Projects often bring together people from different professional disciplines, organizational cultures, countries, and stakeholder groups. Team members may have different assumptions about hierarchy, communication, risk, quality, time, or success. Leaders who recognize that their own perspective is only one possible interpretation of reality are better able to avoid unnecessary conflict, build trust, and adapt their communication style. In project environments, relativism for values helps leaders remain open to alternative viewpoints and prevents premature judgments based solely on personal beliefs or familiar practices. This becomes especially important in international or cross-cultural projects where approaches that work in one cultural setting may fail in another.

In programs, tolerance for pluralism is more strategic because programs frequently involve organizational transformation, societal change, competing stakeholder interests, and ambiguous definitions of success. Unlike projects, which often involve disagreements over implementation details, programs may involve fundamentally conflicting worldviews, political interests, cultural identities, and value systems. Different stakeholder groups may each hold legitimate but incompatible perspectives on priorities, risks, ethics, sustainability, governance, or the desired future state.

Program leaders therefore require a greater capacity to tolerate ambiguity and the coexistence of multiple “truths” without resorting to premature simplification. This does not mean abandoning principles or accepting every position equally but rather recognizing that complex systems rarely admit a single universally accepted interpretation. Leaders who can tolerate pluralism are better able to facilitate dialogue, negotiate compromise, maintain stakeholder engagement, and navigate uncertainty without escalating polarization.

Programs also operate in environments where social narratives, political ideologies, and cultural tensions may strongly influence stakeholder behavior. The ability to remain emotionally balanced while engaging with conflicting beliefs becomes essential for sustaining collaboration across diverse communities and institutions.

In simple terms, relativism for values in projects helps diverse people work together effectively, while in programs, it helps leaders navigate ambiguity, conflicting worldviews, and societal complexity during transformation.

I am a citizen, not of Athens, not of Greece, but of the World (Socrates)

9. Orientation towards **sustainability**, **willpower**, delay instant gratification (perspective of linear and circular time flow)

We can pursue long-term goals and make decisions having in mind short-term and long-term consequences. Long-term orientation (LTO) is one of the dimensions we can observe as differentiators among national cultures (according to Hofstede).

In the marshmallow test, young kids were left alone in a room with a marshmallow on the table in front of them. The test administrator told them he would leave the room and come back in 5 minutes. If the marshmallow was still there, they would get a second one. About 15 years later, it was found that the kids who showed restraint and got the second marshmallow were statistically significantly more successful in life (www.simplypsychology.org/marshmallow-test.html). Yes, we like willpower, persistence, and restraint, and we support sustainability by words, yet we all make decisions that satisfy our immediate wishes. Think the jojo effect seen with diets.

There indeed are exercises to increase our will power and stamina, many of them establishing new habits and rituals. Meditation, working on your posture, going on a food diet, making promises, and keeping them, measuring your life (presenting progress to yourself, so you are frequently reminded of your goals) are some of them. Military training and martial arts contain willpower exercises. Being mindful, prudent, living in the present and increasing your self-awareness helps.

Long-term orientation, willpower, and the ability to delay gratification are important in both projects and programs, but they operate at different scales and with different strategic implications.

In projects, long-term orientation primarily supports disciplined execution and sustained performance. Projects often require teams to resist short-term temptations, such as compromising quality, ignoring risks, bypassing governance, or prioritizing immediate convenience over long-term project success. Project leaders with strong self-discipline are better able to maintain focus, persistence, and consistency under pressure. Habits such as careful planning, regular progress measurement, reflection, and disciplined communication contribute to reliable delivery and resilience. In projects, willpower is often evident in maintaining commitment to schedules, quality standards, stakeholder expectations, and professional behavior, even during stressful phases.

Projects also involve balancing short-term operational decisions with longer-term consequences. For example, technical shortcuts taken to meet immediate deadlines may later create maintenance costs, security vulnerabilities, or operational instability. Leaders who think long term are more likely to protect sustainability, knowledge transfer, quality, and future usability instead of optimizing only for immediate delivery metrics.

In programs, long-term orientation becomes more strategic because programs are designed to create enduring organizational or societal benefits over extended periods. Programs often involve transformation journeys that may take years before benefits fully materialize. Program leaders therefore need the ability to maintain direction, stakeholder commitment, and strategic patience despite setbacks, shifting political priorities, leadership turnover, or pressure for quick, visible results.

Unlike projects, which are often measured by near-term delivery, programs require sustained investment in long-term value creation, behavioral change, capability building, and cultural transformation. This frequently creates tension between short-term pressures and long-term goals. Program leaders must therefore resist reactive decision-making and maintain alignment with broader strategic outcomes even when immediate rewards are limited.

Long-term orientation in programs is also closely connected to sustainability, resilience, and responsible governance. Leaders must consider not only current stakeholders but also future consequences, future users, and long-term systemic effects.

In simple terms, long-term orientation in projects supports disciplined and sustainable delivery, while in programs it supports enduring transformation, strategic resilience, and sustained value creation over time.

I'll be back (Arnold Schwarzenegger)

10. **Uncertainty tolerance**, ability to strategize

Accept that life is unpredictable. So, swim in life as you swim in a river, responding to currents and waves as they come along. Enjoy the ride.

This competency also eases our acceptance of change, that change is a key part of life, inevitable and we should be able to deal with it. Any project initiation needs uncertainty tolerance, we approach the project thru progressive elaboration, and we only know what we built when we are finished.

The concept of a future and sequential time is a human mental model. In nature, we do observe cyclic models of time instead. Think of day and night, seasons, sleeping and being awake, and fertility cycles. Without thinking about a future, there is no feeling of uncertainty and less fear. Some human groups (e.g. Suaheli) indeed have no word and no mental concept for future. They live in the present (sasa) and, going forward, try to accommodate it to the past (zamani).

In Immanuel Kant's Critique of pure reason (1781), time and space are properties of human cognition – in fact, the two most fundamental categories of human cognition. That means time and space are not real but imagination. They define the way in which our mind experiences, and thinks about, the world. Time, in particular, is "die innere Form der Anschauung", (the inner form of intuition).

Acceptance of uncertainty and change or even the search for it is important in both projects and programs, but its meaning and leadership implications become much broader and deeper in program environments.

In projects, uncertainty tolerance primarily supports adaptive execution and practical problem-solving. Every project begins with incomplete knowledge and evolves through progressive elaboration: requirements change, risks emerge, stakeholders shift priorities, and technical realities become clearer only during implementation. Project leaders therefore need the ability to remain effective despite ambiguity and unpredictability. Leaders who accept uncertainty are less likely to become paralyzed by imperfect information or overly attached to rigid plans. Instead, they can respond flexibly to changing circumstances, learn continuously, and guide teams calmly through disruption. In projects, uncertainty tolerance helps teams cope with risks, unexpected events, changing requirements, and delivery challenges without excessive fear or reactive behavior.

Projects also benefit from the understanding that plans are models rather than reality. While schedules, forecasts, and milestones are necessary, experienced project leaders recognize that uncertainty is not an exception but a normal condition of delivery work. This mindset supports agility, resilience, iterative learning, and constructive adaptation.

In programs, uncertainty tolerance becomes much more strategic because programs operate in environments characterized by long time horizons, evolving stakeholder dynamics, political complexity, technological disruption, and systemic change. Unlike projects, where uncertainty often concerns implementation details, program uncertainty frequently affects the direction, meaning, and objectives of the transformation itself. The environment may evolve so significantly that assumptions, priorities, and even definitions of success must be reconsidered continuously.

Program leaders therefore need a higher capacity to tolerate ambiguity, incomplete information, and evolving realities without forcing artificial certainty. This includes accepting that large transformations rarely unfold linearly and that control is always partial. The metaphor of "swimming in a river" is especially relevant for programs: leaders must continuously respond to shifting currents rather than assume stable, fully predictable conditions.

Programs also require balancing future-oriented strategic thinking with presence and adaptability in the present. Excessive attachment to rigid future plans can heighten fear, resistance, and inflexibility. Leaders who accept uncertainty more readily can remain calmer, more resilient, and better able to adjust strategy as reality unfolds.

In simple terms, uncertainty tolerance in projects helps teams adapt during delivery, while in programs it helps leaders navigate evolving complexity, transformation, and systemic unpredictability over time.

Panta Rhei (everything is in flow, Heraklit)

11. Self-distance, **humility**

Socrates said, "I know that I know nothing." Do not think you are the center of the world which will continue once you pass away. Avoid envy, bragging, pride, greed and being a taker, not a giver. Narcissism is a mental illness. Be a giver, not a taker (Adam Grant). Humility requires controlling our ego and not defining ourselves by our past achievements, titles, and awards. You like humble people.

Humility is important in both projects and programs, but its role becomes increasingly critical as complexity, uncertainty, and stakeholder diversity grow.

In projects, humility primarily supports collaboration, learning, and effective leadership. Projects frequently require specialists with different expertise to work together under pressure. Leaders who assume they already know everything may stop listening, reject feedback, underestimate risks, or discourage open communication. Humble project leaders are more willing to admit uncertainty, ask questions, learn from others, and acknowledge mistakes early before they become serious problems. This creates psychological safety within teams and encourages transparency, continuous improvement, and knowledge sharing. Humility also helps project leaders avoid becoming overly attached to personal status, authority, or preferred solutions, making it easier to adapt when circumstances change.

Projects benefit greatly from leaders who act as facilitators rather than controllers. Teams are more likely to trust leaders who share credit, support others, and

demonstrate service-oriented leadership instead of ego-driven behavior. In this sense, humility contributes directly to teamwork, resilience, and delivery effectiveness.

In programs, humility becomes even more important because program environments involve large-scale transformation, multiple stakeholder groups, political interests, and systemic complexity that no single individual can fully understand or control. Program leaders must continuously engage with conflicting perspectives, incomplete information, and evolving realities. Leaders who lack humility may become rigid, defensive, overly ideological, or attached to their own vision, increasing the risk of stakeholder resistance, polarization, and strategic failure.

Programs require leaders to recognize the limits of their own knowledge and the value of collective intelligence. Humility supports listening across organizational boundaries, respecting diverse stakeholder experiences, and accepting that transformation emerges through collaboration rather than command-and-control leadership. It also helps leaders remain open to learning, reframing assumptions, and adjusting direction when new evidence emerges.

Humility is closely connected to servant leadership and the idea of being a "giver, not a taker." In program environments especially, leadership legitimacy often depends less on formal authority and more on trust, credibility, empathy, and the ability to help others succeed.

In simple terms, humility in projects helps teams collaborate and learn effectively, while humility in programs helps leaders navigate complexity without becoming trapped by ego, certainty, or attachment to power.

> ***There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self. (Hemingway)***

12. Conclusion

Imagine a person who exhibits serenity, can empathetically understand how you feel, knows how to look at problems, is humble, does not fear uncertainty, considers long-term consequences, tolerates others' judgments, considers the specifics of each situation, can make fun of themselves, and always has an alternative to offer. For me, this person comes across as authentic, trustworthy, helpful, and caring. A real leader I want to follow and a role model for my own development. The ten competencies that make up wisdom can be strengthened through approaches and therapies originally developed by psychologists to address mental and emotional challenges that may otherwise reduce quality of life or even become life-threatening. Even if we consider ourselves mentally stable and healthy, consciously developing these competencies

helps prevent future problems and increases our ability to navigate the complexity, uncertainty, and social challenges that life continually presents.

Some competencies naturally feel more difficult to develop than others. Tolerating plurality, controlling emotions, accepting uncertainty, reducing ego, or questioning one's own assumptions may directly challenge deeply rooted beliefs, habits, and identities. Becoming aware of these limitations and remaining open to change are therefore essential first steps toward personal growth.

A practical exercise is to list the ten competencies and assess yourself honestly, for example on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 would represent exceptional mastery — although true wisdom probably questions every perfect score. Then ask trusted friends, mentors, family members, colleagues, or team members to assess you as well. Comparing self-image and external perception increases self-awareness and highlights blind spots and development opportunities. Discussing these gaps with mentors, coaches, or psychologists may help avoid tunnel vision and support balanced development.

These competencies are particularly relevant for leadership in projects and programs. Projects require collaboration, resilience, emotional balance, contextual awareness, and disciplined execution under pressure. Programs require all of these competencies at an even deeper level because they involve transformation, ambiguity, competing stakeholder interests, political dynamics, and long-term uncertainty. Technical expertise alone is rarely sufficient for successful leadership in complex environments. Increasingly, leadership success depends on emotional maturity, cognitive flexibility, humility, empathy, and the ability to navigate complexity without becoming overwhelmed.

Imagine a person who demonstrates serenity, empathy, humility, long-term thinking, tolerance for ambiguity, openness to alternative perspectives, awareness of context, emotional self-control, and the ability to laugh about themselves while continuously learning. Such a person appears authentic, trustworthy, resilient, supportive, and caring. In projects, they create stable and collaborative teams; in programs, they help entire organizations navigate transformation and uncertainty. This is the kind of leader many people willingly follow, and a meaningful role model for our personal development.

Wisdom Competency	Projects	Programs
1. Ability to change perspectives	Supports operational problem-solving, collaboration, and balancing technical, business, and stakeholder viewpoints during delivery. Perspective shifts help resolve conflicts and improve execution.	Becomes strategic and systemic. Program leaders must reconcile competing worldviews, political interests, organizational cultures, and evolving stakeholder definitions of success across long-term transformations.
2. Empathy and ability to connect	Helps build trust within teams, understand user needs, improve communication, and manage stakeholder expectations during execution.	Critical for sustaining transformation and stakeholder alignment over time. Program leaders must empathize not only with individuals but also with groups, cultures, institutions, and communities experiencing change differently.
3. Self-awareness	Supports emotional regulation, professionalism, and awareness of biases under operational pressure. Helps improve teamwork and decision-making.	Becomes strategic because leaders influence large-scale transformation environments. Lack of self-awareness may create defensiveness, rigidity, or fear that affects entire organizations and stakeholder ecosystems.
4. Serenity / self-control	Helps leaders remain calm during deadlines, conflicts, and delivery disruptions. Creates psychological safety and resilience within teams.	Functions as a stabilizing force in politically charged, uncertain, and emotionally demanding transformation environments. Serenity helps prevent escalation of fear and conflict across large stakeholder systems.
5. Knowledge and problem-solving	Focuses more on applying existing expertise, best practices, and technical knowledge to achieve defined deliverables efficiently.	Requires broader epistemic intelligence, experimentation, systems thinking, and continuous learning to navigate ambiguity, complexity, and wicked problems across interconnected initiatives.
6. Contextualism	Helps tailor solutions to local conditions, stakeholders, regulations, cultures, and operational realities of a specific project environment.	Requires continuous reassessment of evolving political, social, technological, and organizational contexts across multiple projects and changing external systems.
7. Relativism for values / tolerance for pluralism	Supports collaboration in culturally and professionally diverse teams and reduces unnecessary conflict caused by rigid assumptions.	Essential for managing conflicting stakeholder values, ideologies, and worldviews in societal or organizational transformation contexts characterized by ambiguity and competing truths.
8. Long-term orientation / delay of gratification	Encourages disciplined delivery, quality, sustainability, and resisting short-term shortcuts that create future problems.	Central to maintaining strategic direction and stakeholder commitment over long time horizons where benefits may take years to materialize.
9. Uncertainty tolerance / ability to strategize	Helps teams adapt to changing requirements, risks, and progressive elaboration during delivery without paralysis or overreaction.	Becomes foundational because program environments are inherently ambiguous, evolving, and partially uncontrollable. Leaders must continuously adapt strategy as reality changes.
10. Humility / self-distance	Encourages learning, openness to feedback, collaboration, and avoidance of ego-driven decision-making within teams.	Critical for navigating complexity without becoming trapped by certainty, ideology, authority, or attachment to personal vision. Supports collective intelligence and servant leadership in transformation environments.

Table 1 Comparing projects and programs regarding the wisdom competencies (Source: author)

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