A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF PHRÓNÊSIS AS A KEY TOOL FOR PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR MODERN MANAGERS

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Abstract

Phrónêsis or practical wisdom is an important element of Aristotelian virtue ethics. This paper is an attempt to study what is meant by Phrónêsis, how it might be understood, reinterpreted, applied, and extended in contemporary professional management practice and its role in enhancing professional excellence in modern managers. Phrónêsis can equip them for learning through experience, exercising praxis and having a universal and multi-perspective vision and multi-perspective vision and, substantially enhances the levels of self-concept, communication, decision making and interpersonal skills, conditions that are critical to excellence in professional management. The Phrónêtic managers can employ all competencies in its totality. The ideas in this paper will be of use to human resources practitioners and academicians interested in the professional development of managers within organizational settings and classroom settings.

Keywords:

phronesis, professional excellence, phronetic thinking, strategic management, practical wisdom

I. INTRODUCTION

A decade or two ago, a commitment to efficiency could make a manager into a great leadership position in the organization. But now, as professional excellence has become a managerial imperative, practical wisdom turns to be a necessity in the profession. The customary practice of western scholars was to distinguish between theoretical rationality, which concerns about what one should believe and practical rationality, which concerns about what should one act. Rapid technological advancements have put the business world into an environment of dynamic and unpredictable change thereby proved that mere chance and experience are not enough parameters of success. The time has come to replace the traditional managerial models of theoretical rationality with a promising managerial model of practical wisdom and praxis.

Many modern authors are insisting on the inclusion of practical wisdom in management development programs and professional educational systems. The incidents of frequent unwise decisions from a number of managers (even experienced) underline the necessity of wisdom in management practice. In this context, the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom (Phrónêsis) is very relevant with lots of implications. My attempt in this paper is to show how Phrónêsis can and should play a central role and important part in the professional excellence of modern managers. A Phrónêtic Professional Excellence model (PPE) that draws from Phrónêsis is developed and explained here. It will help us to know about the nature and importance of Phrónêsis, its components, and its functioning.

II. PHRÓNÊSIS UNDERSTOOD AND REINTERPRETED

The need and necessity of Phrónêsis in professional life and practice have become a keen area of interest and study in the recent literature (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2016). Many researches have been done in the areas like reflective theorizing (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014), organizational change (Chia R. 2014), need of implementing practical wisdom in management development programm (Small M.W. 2004) and Phrónêsis as professional knowledge (Elizabeth Anne Kinsella Allan Pitman. 2012).

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, propounded the concept of Phrónêsis and it is an important component in his virtue ethics. Various thinkers have used different types of keywords to designate this term. When Jeffrey Stout (1990) designate the term with *practical wisdom*, Max Black (1972) with *reasonableness,* Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, 1988) with *practical rationality,* Dewey (1938/1997) *freedom and self-control* to refer Phrónêsis (Frederick Ellet 2012, p. 15). It is generally defined as practical wisdom or knowledge of the proper ends of life. In the Aristotelian philosophy, it is one among several 'intellectual virtues' or 'excellences of mind' (Eikeland, 2008). Aristotle distinguished Phrónêsis from the two other

virtues - episteme and techne. 'Episteme consists of scientific, universal, invariable, context-independent knowledge and Techne consists of context based, technical, dependent craft knowledge. Techne is always intentional and focused to practical instrumental rationality' (E.A. Kinsella & A. Pitman, 2012, p. 164). Nonaka and Toyama (2007) believe that Phrónêsis is the synthesis of technical, epistemological and practical dimensions (p.378).

The period of Aristotle was striving for the *love of wisdom* – philosophy (*Philos* = love, *Sophia* = wisdom). He believed that human beings are essentially rational, and the ultimate purpose of human life is the happiness which is achieved by living a virtuous life or a *good* life. Something is said to be *good* in the Aristotelian language only if it serves its purpose. As a rational being, when a man lives a virtuous life in accordance with his capacities and attains happiness, he is said to be *good.* His moral values resemble his spiritual values and it is reflected in the personal life and value system. It is phronesis which enables him to lead the good life and it is closely related to his intellectual capacity and moral character based on virtues (Polansky, R. 2000. p.324).

Birmingham (2003) considers Phrónêsis as an ethical necessity which emerges in concrete situations influenced by knowledge and expressed in ethical actions and result (p. 188). According to MacIntyre (1999), Phrónêsis is the quest of good which can be achieved by means of virtues and the result of this quest is the action that is good and best for all (p. 159).

As Mele (2005) observes, Phrónêsis encompasses all other virtues and essentially based on the ethical character and capacity of human being. Phrónêsis is the ability in his personality to perceive the ethical dimension of the reality (p. 102). Phronesis demands ethical character or personality characterised by virtues and values. Right action demands keen perception of particular situations rather than mere knowledge of general principles which are applicable everywhere. This is called the 'eye' in Aristotelian concept, to identify the particular situation as worthy and bring the best course of action (Halverson, 2004, p.92).

This moral character shapes his keen perception that demands cognition and action. In order to act quickly in a given situation with an insightful perception, the person needs two interrelated skills such as pattern recognition and creative response in his personality. Whereas pattern recognition is a cognitive process, the ability of creative response demands a conscious perception and action. This total process is possible through practical wisdom as Baron (2006) observes (p. 108). Derek Sellman (2012) considers phronesis as a combination of cognition and emotion as well as intellect and character (p. 116).

Frederic Ellett (2012) recovers the aspect of 'judgement - which is deliberative, typically indeterminate, but not calculative' from phronesis (p.14). Wall (2003) distinguishes two notions of deliberation from Aristotelian Phrónêsis; first, it is 'the human capacity of deliberating well about what is

good and advantageous for oneself' and second it is 'the deliberation about the means to the good rather than the good end itself' (p.318). Deliberation involves practical judgement informed by reflection of his experiences. It enables the agent to take the wise decision and final action which is enabled by experience – *praxis* (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 150). The personality and perception along with various cognitive, emotional and technical skills equip the agent for this. For D.A. Schön (1983) it is '*reflection in action and reflection on action'* (p.62). Kathy Hibbert (2012) also insists on reflection, deliberation, and action in the discourse of Phrónêsis (p.62). Kinsella (2012) put forwards a series of reflective patterns like (1) receptive or phenomenological reflection, to (2) intentional cognitive reflection, to (3) embodied or tacit reflection, to (4) critical reflexivity (p.36). Flyvbjerg (2006) holds that phronesis is a virtue that makes an interplay and interaction between experience, choice and judgement. Thus Phrónêsis is related to deliberation, judgement, reflection and praxis (E.A. Kinsella & A. Pitman, 2012, p. 164).

Nozick (1989) argues that Practical wisdom is not merely self-oriented and self–centered but it lies in 'being able to see and appreciate the deepest significance of whatever occurs' and 'knowing and understanding the ultimate good along with the proximate goods and seeing the world in this light' (p. 276).

Hagar (2000) considers it as an essential professional skill and support "…workplace learning to the development of phronesis or practical wisdom" and believes on the "… the notion of a developing capacity to make the right judgements in the workplace adequately captures the seamless, holistic character of this know-how" (p.282). Derek Sellman (2012) proposes '*professional phronimos*' (the professionally wise practitioner) as the professional competence (p. 117).

From the above discussions of various implications and interrelationships, the following characteristics of Phrónêsis is recovered and highlighted as an all-pervasive reality in developing managerial excellence. It is displayed in Figure 1.

i. BASE: Phrónêsis operates on the basis of values and virtues.

ii. FORMATION: Phrónêsis is a dynamic interplay of conjoint enablers like Praxis, Personality, Cognition, Perception and Deliberation.

iii. ACTION: Phrónêsis is action oriented that holds the manager accountable for the best management of men, resources, and operations.

iv. RESULT: Phrónêsis is result oriented to achieve the optimum results in organizational, operational and individual realms.

v. VISION: Phrónêsis is vision oriented with an insight of what is of Ultimate and proximate good for All.

III. PPE MODEL

Based on Aristotelian virtue of Phrónêsis, a heuristic model of professional excellence is proposed here for the managers who are currently working and for the students who are in pursuit of managerial profession. It is based on the assumption that regardless of their level of responsibility within the organization, the defining characteristic of excellent managers is that they achieve results by ensuring the full engagement of a motivated and highly committed staff or team of colleagues.

This model is a plausible explanation of what a phronetically formed manager does and what he achieves. It considers various factors that have an impact on managerial effectiveness in the midst of number of variables like his personality, culture, experience, and environment (external and internal) in which a manager operates.
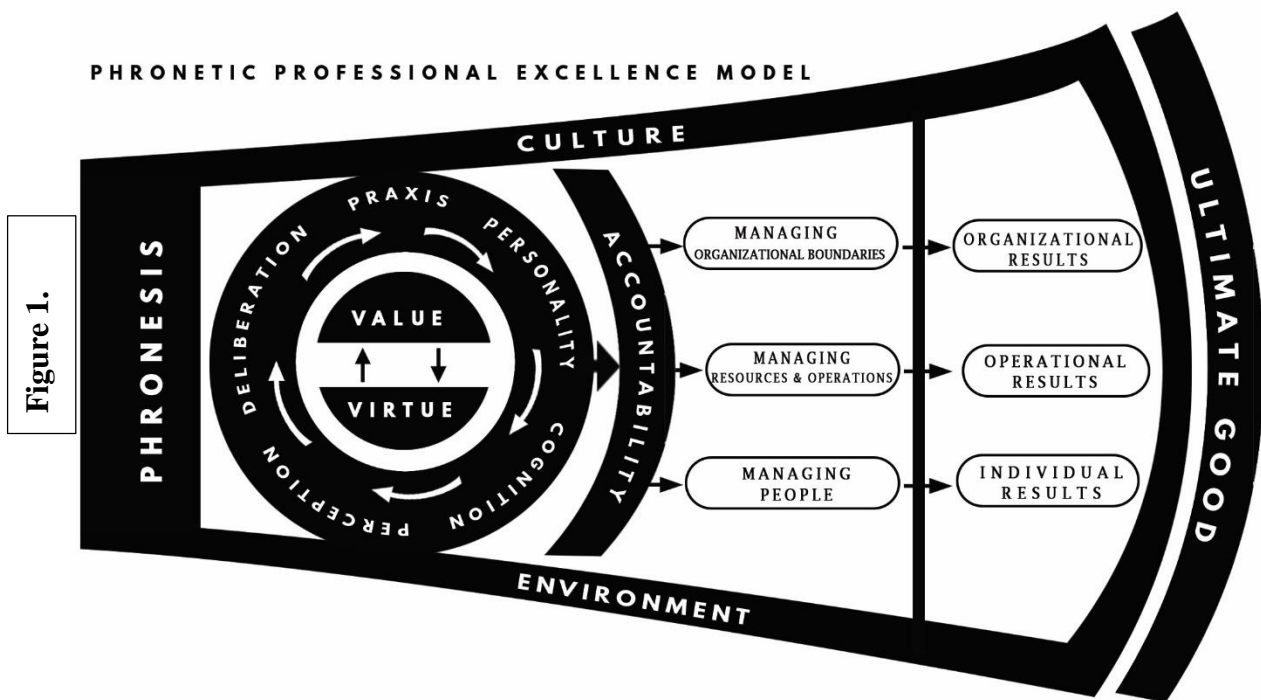

Figure 1.

PHRONETIC PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE MODEL

CULTURE

PHRONESIS

DELIBERATION — PRAXIS — PERSONALITY — COGNITION — PERCEPTION

VALUE ↕ VIRTUE

ACCOUNTABILITY

MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES → ORGANIZATIONAL RESULTS

MANAGING RESOURCES & OPERATIONS → OPERATIONAL RESULTS

MANAGING PEOPLE → INDIVIDUAL RESULTS

ULTIMATE GOOD

ENVIRONMENT

III.I. BASE: Phrónêsis operates on the basis of values and virtues.

Phrónêtic managers can operate only on the basis of values and virtues. Values are the platform on which they are formed, groomed and developed. These values are a combination of spiritual, ethical, personal, and the core values of the company. These values nurture his/her virtues. Joseph Dunne (1993) comments that, "Phrónêtic action can't exist without both intellectual and moral conditions of the mind" (p. 264). A virtuous person (through Phrónêsis) perceives that it is worthwhile to live according to moral values with respect to themselves and others; thereby entering the cycle of virtue acquisition and acquiring practical wisdom. They exemplify and promote these values and virtues in their day-to-day actions and decisions. Such an individual would provide their organisations with significant advantages

as they exercise these virtues and values in their work context. Phrônêsis creates value-virtue-phrónêsis loop and it is the outward workings of an inward mind set of values and virtues.

III. I. I. TRAITS AND ABILITIES THAT CONSTITUTE PHRÓNÊSIS

Values and virtues are the basic drivers for Phrónêsis. This alone cannot cultivate a *Phrónêtic personality* in the individuals. There should be a proper combination of *episteme* and *techne* along with numerous other qualities. Nonaka and Toyama (2007) argue for six abilities that constitute Phrónêsis like, judgment on 'goodness', creation of the shared space of knowledge, grasping the essence of situations (universal & particular), reconstruction of the particulars into universals and vice-versa, use of political means to realize common good, and fostering Phrónêsis in others (p.379). We may put very briefly some of the essential abilities required for being phrónêtic;

1. Conceptual Competence: It refers to a manager's ability to integrate information and make proper judgements using a number of relevant factors. It includes various capacities like *mindfulness, use of concepts, systems thinking, pattern recognition and tacit knowledge* etc.,

2. Emotional Competence: This ability deals with the management of emotions on how to express or release one's inner feelings. It determines one's capacity to lead and express effectively and successfully with ease. Emotional competence requires *intrapersonal intelligence* and *interpersonal intelligence*. Intrapersonal intelligence enable one to understand and focus on one's own emotions, goals and intentions along with self-awareness of his strength and weakness. Interpersonal intelligence, rooted in empathy, concerned with authentic dialogue and proper communication with others.

3. Technical Competence: It deals with the technical proficiency required to exercise effective and efficient performance. It synchronize the operator's competencies and the competencies required for safe and effective execution of that task. It includes skills like *knowledge sharing & networks, information management, continuous learning and development and coaching.*

4. Ontological Competence: Ontology deals with nature of being. The ultimate end of every being is *happiness* with a love of wisdom, freedom, passion and good of all. It's the ability to see the meaning of existence beyond concrete reality. It is an *extra sense* to see a harmony between the individual good and universal good. It consists of *metacognitive intelligence* and *existential intelligence.*

It must be note that none of these abilities alone constitutes phronesis; rather a combination and synchronization of all of these guarantee the best results.

III. II. FORMATION: Phrónêsis is a dynamic interplay of conjoint enablers like Praxis, Personality, Cognition, Perception and Deliberation.

The dynamic interrelationship between the variables or conjoint enablers like Personality, Cognition, Perception, Deliberation and Praxis, is a prerequisite for Phrónêsis. According to Gosling J. and Mintzberg H. (2003), the focus of professional managers must orient towards the mission they should accomplish as well as the vision of how they should think (p. 56). The *phronimos* (wise practitioner) synthesises all these variables in his personality or character formed out of value-virtue-phrónêsis loop.

Praxis is the action enabled by experience. It is through experience and action managers develop Phrónêsis (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 150). Managerial practical wisdom is developed overtime through his *reflective* meditation of past experiences, the meaning he finds out and the action he steps forward. Reflection is an integral part of practical wisdom. E.A. Kinsella (2012) put forwards a sequence of reflection for professional action from (1) receptive or phenomenological reflection, to (2) intentional cognitive reflection, to (3) embodied or tacit reflection, to (4) critical reflexivity (p.36). S Kemmis and T.J. Smith (2008) observe Praxis as 'morally committed action which is oriented and informed by traditions' (p. 5). It requires wise interpretations of the past, present, and future (Kaplan S and Orlikowski W, 2013).

A wise manager requires a different personality embedded with values, virtues, and competencies to think differently and act differently. This personality shapes his perception and makes the wise decision possible by pattern recognition and creative response. This process demands cognitive schemas and requires various skills like conceptual competence, technical competence and emotional competence. Derek Sellman (2012) indicates that Phrónêsis involves cognition and emotion along with intellect and character. He proposes phronimos as a professional competence (p.116). Hartman (2006), by affirming Aristotle's notion, emphasis the relation between character and perception. He observes, "The person of good character perceives a situation rightly – that is, takes proper account of the salient features" (p. 73). Practical wisdom cultivates in him appropriate character and vision and that further enable his insightful perception for reflection, deliberation, and judgement. Halverson (2004) comments, "embodied in character and developed through habit, it is expressed through particular actions as how individuals 'size up' a situation and develop and execute an appropriate plan of action" (p. 94).

Phrónêsis works only with deliberation and it depends on deliberation which is not easy to acquire. A wise manager with an insightful perception and reflective meditation of his experiences reaches towards deliberation. Through deliberation, reflection and judgement the Phrónêtic manager synthesis the universal and the particular variables with his team for the benefit the individuals, the

organization and the world as a whole. Managerial excellence is not merely the rational decision making skill or problem-solving skill but rather it is a praxis-oriented wisdom when confronting with chaos situations in the professional world (Ericson M. 2013). Kathy Hibbert (2012) insists on reflection, deliberation, and action in the professional educational framework to cultivate the virtue of Phrónêsis in the practitioners to form students as '*professionals and intellectuals*' (p.62). Thus it is clear that there is a dynamic interplay between variables like experience, personality, cognition, perception, deliberation and action in the phronetic way of management.

As each and every aspect of these variables is oriented towards the Ultimate good, this would result in Phrónêsis. The fertile land for this dynamic interplay is those organizations who strive for the Universal good which stands for *All* (*all the living and non-living realities*).

III. III. ACTION: Phrónêsis is action oriented that holds the manager accountable for the best management of men, resources, and operations.

Phrónêtic managers' praxis reflects on a number of domains like managing people, managing operations, and resources, managing change etc., Practical wisdom helps to hold themselves and others accountable for all the resources like man, money, machine and material. They account for, report on, and explain their actions and the use of the human and other resources entrusted to them. They excel at managing people, bringing out the best in every member of their team. Practical wisdom is expressed in their capacity to decide which virtue to be enacted in a particular situation and what will be the best mode of executing that decision.

Joy Higgs (2012) believes that practical wisdom is the sum of propositional and experiential knowledge; that leads to managerial action. Phronesis enable them to combine various managerial competencies and skills together to commit themselves and others to action. "*Here episteme, techne, and phronesis dance together*" (p. 77). They set organizational direction towards the Ultimate and proximate good for all and take action with means to ensure results are achieved that meet the *proper end*. Because of their experience and wisdom, they have a finely tuned understanding of the department's surface and deeper structures. The appropriate personality, formed out of conjoint enablers, allow them to navigate effectively within the departmental boundaries and beyond and thereby creating partnerships and alliance. Phrónêtic personality enhances their capacity in building relationships with stakeholders and partners and leveraging internal and external networks.

III. IV. RESULT: Phrônêsis is result oriented to achieve the optimum results in organizational, operational and individual realms.

Phrónêtic Model strive for the optimum result because these managers have 'universal vision' by which they are able to pay attention to their environment and the world beyond it, seeing how their actions and work unit/department actions interrelate with various areas of activity. They understand and anticipate cause and effect cycles that form systems. They use their insights to solve strategic issues and bring about organizational, operational and individual changes which are sustainable. They learn from day to day experiences, identify patterns and make meaning out of apparent paradoxes. They bring about transformational changes by cultivating a culture of *collective* phronesis along with *individual* phronesis (Stephen Kemmis, 2012, p. 148). This brings a new era in the field of management.

III. V. VISION: Phrónêsis is vision oriented with an insight of what is of Ultimate and proximate good for All.

Phrónêtic managers are those who base themselves on values and virtues and directing towards the Ultimate concern in each and every move they take. They are already enlightened with an *extra sense* and bring the whole team to work. The vision of ultimate good enables them to consider organization as an organic entity with one soul and one vision. Individuals with good spiritual and virtuous base "express inner life needs by seeking meaningful work" (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 136). They find themselves, their work and the workplace in connection to something greater than the material world. Profession becomes vocation and organization becomes a unified body which seeks the ultimate and proximate good of all. That results in higher productivity, best quality, increased job motivation and job delight, meaningful work life etc., As Nozick (1989) believes Phrónêsis lies in 'being able to see and appreciate the deepest significance of whatever occurs' and 'knowing and understanding the ultimate good along with the proximate goods and seeing the world in this light' (p. 276).

IV. IMPLICATIONS, APPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

This paper was an attempt to understand, reinterpret and recover various dimensions of Aristotelian virtue ethics Phrónêsis in order to formulate a model which enhances the professional excellence in modern managers, as well as in students who pursue professional education. Aristotle lived in an era which considered acquiring knowledge lead one to life's good. At that time women were considered inferior to men, the distinction between races was strong and the world was considered eternal. But we live in an era which is entirely different from that of Aristotle. The present world is dynamic and undergoing constant and unpredictable changes. The list of excellent managers consists of both men and women. There are

no more racial or religious discrimination in the professional field. Experience and knowledge alone cannot bring best results in a world where even efficient managers take unwise decisions frequently. While Sustainable development has become a priority, the anthropocentric point of view needs to be replaced with an ecocentric point of view. All these necessitates in the manager an *extra sense* for professional excellence. In this context, PPE model would serve as innovative human resource management tool to form phronetic mangers and communities. Phrónêsis was highlighted as an all-pervasive reality throughout this model and the five features of this model we discussed was;

1. Phrónêsis operates on the basis of values and virtues.
2. Phrónêsis is a dynamic interplay of conjoint enablers like Praxis, Personality, Cognition, Perception and Deliberation.
3. Phrónêsis is action oriented that holds the manager accountable for the best management of men, resources, and operations.
4. Phrónêsis is result oriented to achieve the optimum results in organizational, operational and individual realms.
5. Phrónêsis is vision oriented with an insight of what is of Ultimate and proximate good for All.

This model gives a narrative of best management practice for achieving professional excellence. What makes this model distinct from traditional models is that it brings about integrity and dynamic interrelation between values, virtues, competencies, action and result. It makes organization as a *live entity* and *totality* oriented towards *ultimate good*. It redefines traditional managerial framework from a new perspective of wisdom and insight, where managers need to *wise* not intelligent. By considering the organization in its totality, it presents a framework of what to do and how to achieve sustainable results by giving due importance to the *good of all* i.e, human being, all living and non-living being (*ecocentric development*). Although not statistically proven, this model gives guidelines how to achieve the best managerial result through the interplay of action, experience, cognition, perception and reflective deliberation in both general and particular situations. This model presupposes that the *wise managers* in the past and present would have undergone this process of practical wisdom at all levels, even though not so systematically. Although this model is not complete and definite, if one can apply this model on the experience of successful managers, the results will be empirically proven. It can be used as a model for practicing managers in enhancing wise decision-making skills. In professional management education system, this can be used as a tool for developing practical wisdom in novice managers. While interviewing and imparting training, this model can be used as a tool for effective results. I hope this paper has made a contribution to innovative human resource techniques, even though not empirically and conceptually proved. There is more to elaborate empirically and conceptually.

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