



By Joe Byerly

*“For even sheep do not vomit up their grass and show to the shepherds how much they have eaten; but when they have internally digested the pasture, they produce externally wool and milk. Do you also show not your theorems to the uninstructed, but show the acts which come from their digestion.”* -[Discourses of Epictetus](#)

I came across a reference to this quote the other day while reading [How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius](#) by Donald Robertson.

It sparked some thoughts on the difference between knowledge and wisdom and its application to military leaders.

### **There are a lot of knowledgeable leaders**

I know a lot of smart military leaders. They can rattle off dates of battles. They can quote doctrine like a Southern Baptist can quote scripture. Some even have advanced degrees and have taught in our military academies.

It feels good to appear smart and impress peers, bosses, and subordinates with knowledge, but is it helpful?

Let's take a look at wisdom.

### **Getting to Wisdom**

If knowledge is the accumulation and regurgitation of a bunch of information, wisdom is being able to digest and produce like Epictetus' sheep.

For example, it's great when leaders know facts and figures about famous battles or can quote theorists like Clausewitz or Sun Tzu, but so what? I'd rather have someone who can take the knowledge of those battles, along with the lessons from experience, apply it to the current situation, and then visualize and describe the way forward.

Wisdom is knowing when to push an organization and when to back off.

Wisdom is surrounding yourself with people smarter than you so you can do your job better.

Wisdom is not only knowing the difference between right and wrong, it's also knowing

yourself good enough so that you avoid the ethical dilemma in the first place.

Here's what I've learned from years of reading, making mistakes in leadership and staff positions, and A LOT of reflection — knowledge is easy.

Wisdom should be the goal of self-development. Wisdom takes a lifetime. It comes from a deliberate investment in your development. It comes from studying the past. It comes from both success and failure. It comes from taking the time to reflect on experiences until we find the lessons we need to learn.

### **Turning Knowledge into Wisdom**

There are plenty of ways for you to start turning knowledge into wisdom:

- Think about the leaders you admire and the ones you can't stand. Use their examples to improve your own leadership abilities.
- Read a book or an article about a war or a battle, then go and test out what you learned during the next training exercise.
- Wake up early in the morning and think through areas where you can improve, and spend the day working on them. Take a few moments to reflect at night on what you accomplished and what you need to work more on the next day.
- Seek out mentors who can point out your blind spots (even when it hurts) and help you get better.

If you fail, that's okay. You're still investing in your endstate — wisdom.

The next time you want to brag about a fact you learned from reading or school. Stop yourself. That's not wisdom. Instead, show someone how you've incorporated your lessons into your daily habits.

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