

A Renaissance man in the 21st century business manager

Every time I'm sitting in class, the same questions come to mind. Both as a full-time student and business manager, each time I hear a new topic's name, or I learn some new theory, I ask myself the same string of questions; How can this make me a better manager? Is this explaining what's going on in my company? In the market? Have I implemented this yet? How can this make my organization perform better?

Having somehow managed to start a business at the age of 18, with no idea how to *manage* a business and making a fair share of mistakes in the process, many of my approaches to management were through trial and error. Afterwards, entering university to find myself learning that many of the daily happenings of my coffee shop have a name, that's involved in a theory that someone explained decades ago with all its ups and downs... has been an enlightening process. An interesting one, too. I find myself in the unique position of learning of a broad array of subjects and being able to measure, day by day, what they mean for us managers – how relevant and up to date they are in the current managerial environment that we are involved in.

Yet, none of it seems as perfect and squeaky-clean in real life. That's a given in any field; the theory is much nicer on paper than in practice – especially for us small-business managers. In a setting like ours, we don't have the luxury of having a large team with a financial analyst, someone doing HR, or a lawyer reminding us what we *technically* can't and shouldn't do. It's just us, and we've got a lot of work to do – while crossing our fingers hoping we don't make some grave mistake in the process out of lack of knowing better. When learning about management, I imagine all the theory applied in a huge, multinational company; I'm sure many of my classmates do, too. But it's a scenario that's too idealized, more so when comparing it to the multitasking functions that today's managers need to do on a daily basis.

When hearing Peter Drucker's broader definitions however, they suddenly seem more approachable to the average small-business manager. In his conceptualization of management, the discipline is defined in a format that allows us to apply it to any scenario. Drucker states that management is "the governing organ of *all* institutions of Modern Society" and presents it as a tool that may be used in any field and setting¹. Describing traditional views on management, Drucker challenges the widespread assumption that management is exclusively associated to business management, and that this is in fact a mistake; we can manage any institution, and managers exist in a wide array of scenarios, that range from complex institutions to even personal affairs².

As Drucker explains, the paradigms of social science are the assumption that said science makes of reality; each discipline's basic assumptions determine what it recognizes and what it ignores³. While stating the importance of these assumptions and how they shape each discipline, in this case management, Drucker also mentions how rarely they are challenged. However, as management itself needs to be a multidisciplinary field, and in an ever more globalized and interconnected world there are more factors and perspectives to consider, it's necessary to tackle these changes and new knowledge via continuous learning. The speed at which knowledge is generated and travels on a global level can't be met by static assumptions, more so when these choose to ignore certain external factors that affect managers and their organizations. In a globalized setting, even a local business can be affected by an event half a world away. Drucker himself recognizes the cruciality of a wider, multipolar perspective in managerial matters, stating that that there will "be new skills and, with them, a need for the manager of tomorrow to

¹ Peter F. Drucker, *Management* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2008), vi.

² Drucker, *Management*, 67.

³ Drucker, *Management*, 65.

organize his or her own self-development and to acquire the habit of continuous learning”, therefore defining that in order for a manager to grow within their role they must also learn from other areas⁴. Drucker seems to be the first to take an approach that recognizes the need for a wider range of knowledge from different fields to enrich the process of management itself, considering that new knowledge is being generated every day that can affect each organization, and that executives must be both managers and “synthesizers of different fields of knowledge”⁵.

Considering the focus on drawing from multidisciplinary knowledge, Drucker’s redefinition of management perfectly characterizes elements seen during the Renaissance which were implemented by some of the era’s protagonists. Drucker establishes a theoretical basis in which we can describe managers as organizers and decision makers that are enriched by various areas of knowledge in order to perform comprehensive management within their own area of operation; this same definition that he uses to describe a contemporary manager can also characterize the *modus operandi* of notable Renaissance men from centuries ago. In fact, this definition also encompasses the necessities of day to day management where Drucker’s theories are cohesive with the real practice, as I’ve seen in my experience. Here, Drucker has a transformative insight regarding the nature of current management in its own theory, while seamlessly describing efforts that have been implemented by great leaders who fit into the Renaissance man role.

The Renaissance, having occurred nearly seven hundred years ago, served as a rebirth of society and took us from the Dark Ages to Modernity via the many transformations that had an emphasis on mankind and knowledge. Figures like Da Vinci, Cosimo the Elder, Niccolo Machiavelli and

⁴ Drucker, *Management*, 521.

⁵ Drucker, *Management*, 525.

other geniuses of the era arose and are hailed for having a wide portfolio of knowledge in several fields that allowed them to come to prominence and establish the Renaissance Man figure we refer to today. The multidisciplinary and knowledge elements in management that Drucker describes parallel the polymathic nature of the efforts taken by many of the historic figures that characterize the essence of the era. In fact, said efforts are evidenced in Cosimo de' Medici's rise to power through his wide range of endeavors that secured his influence throughout Italian society at the cusp of the Renaissance.

If we were to interpret the Medicis as a familial institution that, for lack of better words from the era, *managed* Florence for centuries, Cosimo the Elder may very well be a manager within the Renaissance while embracing the intellectual style of a Renaissance man. Considering organizational matters, for example, the Medici family's rise to power begins with Cosimo's centralization of the family structure, creating a cohesive family group with scores of associated households of which he was the sole patriarchal leader⁶. With this social and political clique within Florentine society, Cosimo exerted both political and business leadership that extended his and his family's influence at the time; and simultaneously, the management of financial matters cycled back to strengthen his political influence via his patronage of the arts and learning⁷. Economic and business relationships secured his family's rule of the city, but Cosimo also paired this with the improvement of his public image⁸.

Cosimo not only ran the city from the commonly used channels of politics and economics, but increased his influence via his patronage of the arts that led to a close relationship with the

⁶ Kelly Ann Gilbert, "*Medici Power and Patronage under Cosimo the Elder and Lorenzo the Magnificent*" (Senior Honors Theses, Eastern Michigan University, 2005), 6.

⁷ Gilbert, "*Medici Power and Patronage under Cosimo the Elder and Lorenzo the Magnificent*", 18.

⁸ Gilbert, "*Medici Power and Patronage under Cosimo the Elder and Lorenzo the Magnificent*", 41.

humanists of the era and a public persona of a wise man, fit to rule Florentine society from all of the forces within it⁹. Through ties to other thinkers of the era, he constantly sought knowledge on the ideas that were propelling the Renaissance; this too would become the custom of Lorenzo the Magnificent, future patriarch of the Medici¹⁰. Their patronage of education, philosophy and the arts also allowed both Cosimo the Elder and Lorenzo to become aware of the spirit of the times, ever more humanistic, and understand at a greater depth the society they sought to lead and *how* to lead it. Holding influence in vast areas of society such as the arts, business, politics and philosophy as well as constantly learning about the transformations in societal thought, ultimately secured the Medici dynastic rule for centuries. Even seven centuries ago, without the same speed by which knowledge is generated and transferred in today's globalized world, continuous learning was crucial to a Renaissance family seeking to lead a society that was being transformed in all areas.

As Drucker states "it is managers who make institutions perform", and in this setting, we can see how Cosimo coordinated and synthesized factors from all spheres of life to perform for the sake of his familial institution and its purpose. The decisions made by Cosimo as head of the Medicis at the beginning of the Renaissance secured their monopolized leadership of Florence, but generations of patriarchs maintained and developed the influence of the Medici family as an institution by keeping pace with the transformations of society through learning.

Through Drucker's interpretation of management, we can classify the holistic approach of Renaissance leaders, like Cosimo, that considered the management of all aspects that would affect the organization and its purpose. In fact, Drucker's theory adopts a sense of timelessness

⁹ Gilbert, "*Medici Power and Patronage under Cosimo the Elder and Lorenzo the Magnificent*", 42.

¹⁰ Gilbert, "*Medici Power and Patronage under Cosimo the Elder and Lorenzo the Magnificent*", 40.

when we consider that it can describe a scenario that occurred centuries ago just as well as a current managerial setting. Even if the organizational settings that existed centuries ago may not be cohesive with those that management as a discipline contemplates today, the descriptions that Drucker makes regarding the requirements for good leadership in managers in any institution have been proved historically. The *tendency to manage* or at least to lead and influence has always existed, even if our first conceptualizations of management only arise in the 20th century in a business setting which most theorists adhere to. However, when viewing Drucker's all-encompassing definition many timeless factors that are present in any human organization can be categorized and analyzed.

Just as the Medicis approached their leadership with a learning of the humanist philosophies that were transforming their society, today's managers also require constant knowledge on today's social changes. In the 21st century more than ever, old assumptions on topics like the environment, the role of technology, gender and politics are being challenged; and we can view these changes in real time via the internet, but we need to keep up with them. This is the new daily challenge that managers are faced with; keeping up with the times. Drucker calls on us to consider both the present and the future. Just as in the Renaissance; in this century we have seen, and will see, monumental societal transformations that leaders need to keep track of and measure for the implications that they will have on our institutions. If we hope to gain knowledge from these transformations for our future, we need to constantly look around and take advantage of the platforms that technology provides so that we may continuously learn.

The same managers and knowledge workers who require continuous learning and teaching in modern institutions for the sake of setting objectives, organizing and making decisions, can be inspired by Drucker's ideas to take on the spirit of the Renaissance man. In fact, I myself am. In

a setting where the availability of knowledge workers and specialists is limited, many managers need to take on the roles that would be covered by several individuals within larger companies; and the key to this is via continuous learning of knowledges and perspectives. This isn't only useful; it has proven to be crucial in the very case of my business, where in managing a small team I, as a manager, need to be on top all the aspects my coffee shop is involved in. If I had remained stagnant in the same assumptions regarding my business that I had when I started years ago, it would have proved disastrous. By learning from different fields, I've been able to consider different approaches to sales, marketing, human resources, and even the coffee itself, and it's been a process that *has* enriched my performance as a manager. It will continue to do so, and in my experience, there's been no greater resource than that of learning itself; it has ultimately been about learning to manage and perform better. Drucker may not have drawn on the figures of the Renaissance when creating his theories on management, but in a rather understanding way, he has described techniques that have proven to be crucial in the nature of organizations themselves, regardless of time and setting, and organized them into theory.

I find that it's us "little guys" in management who are looking up to Drucker's lessons the most. Many managers in family businesses, their own small shops, and even in individual freelance work don't have the same means by which to become great managers that leaders in larger organizations do. For us, a big mistake can come at a great loss, so when the opportunity for a lesson from *the* Peter Drucker comes by, I cross my fingers I can use it to become better and to get my business to do more. The approach to be a multidisciplinary manager, who is continuously learning, is a task that needs to be incorporated as a habit, but that is nonetheless accessible to almost anyone and necessary to all.

So, while we can learn from the likes of da Vinci and his insatiable appetite for knowledge, or the strategy of the Medicis, and be inspired by them, it's a bit too farfetched to aspire to become a genius polymath in every-day management. Nonetheless, I think the inspiration provided by great minds that have been heralded throughout history can be brought down to the setting of even the simplest business. We need to constantly learn, from different disciplines, from society and whatever transformations we will witness in our era, if we want our organizations to carry on with success. Drucker establishes himself as the new classic for management in the 21st century, having captured an idea that I think will endure for decades. We need to seek new knowledge and challenge the knowledge we already have – recognizing what basic knowledge needs to stay, change or be replaced – and to achieve this, the managers of tomorrow need to start learning today. Every time we learn something new, we need to ask: How can this make me a better manager? How can this make my organization perform better?

Bibliography

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