

Back in the Classroom: An Art Teacher Consults Drucker on Restorative Educational Leadership



*"Strong people always have strong weaknesses too. Where there are peaks, there are valleys...The executive who therefore tries to avoid weakness rather than make strength effective is a weak man himself."*¹

-Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive*

"I'll share my screen now"

The year is 2021, and I am sitting alone by the foot of a hospital bed with a blazer over my shirt and faded shorts as I facilitate my last online class for the day. Despite my plain, steel cabinet background, I am tempted to momentarily switch off my camera with the hopes of conserving my mobile data and all the energy it is taking for me to appear focused on my students' paintings. In between class discussions, I excuse myself and move my laptop away so I can change my father's diaper as I wait for the nurses to administer his medicine.

¹ Quote lifted from Peter F. Drucker's 1967 book "The Effective Executive."

This is what it takes to be a good educator, I genuinely thought to myself at the time. As I write this, I wholeheartedly wish that I had taken on a different mindset in my attempt to become superhuman.

Ready or not

About 3 months prior to this scene, I had just been appointed as Department Head at the school where I've taught Art for 4 years, and students, parents, and teachers around the world were gradually conditioning themselves to the fact that online classes would no longer be a standard option upon enrollment due to Covid-19². Social distancing had immediately become a thing of the past as herd immunity was seemingly within reach and more influencers casually posted their maskless gatherings online³. Despite the evident global crisis, I felt as though I was at the top of my game and actually looked forward to the possibility of schools reopening.

But the timing, as you can imagine, was nothing short of a wake up call for those of us who had just gotten used to the online mode of teaching and soon we found ourselves adapting to yet another format of instruction⁴. In the flurry of it all my fellow teachers and I somehow chose to be driven by this adrenaline of newness instead of magnifying what it really was: an unprecedented paradigm shift that no degree program or workshop could ever train one for⁵.

Perhaps you have had a glimpse of this academic gold rush yourself through your child or nephew or maybe even as a graduate student during the pandemic: it is currently both an interesting and experimental time in the educational landscape wherein seemingly every school in the country⁶ (following suit with the rest of the world⁷) is in a race to emerge with the most accommodating curriculum that could compensate for two-years worth of learning gaps. It is almost as if the world wasn't grieving the loss of

² Al Jazeera. "Philippine Schools Reopen after One of World's Longest Shutdowns." *Www.aljazeera.com*, 22 Aug. 2022, www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/22/philippine-schools-reopen-after-one-of-worlds-longest-shutdowns.

³ Rabin, Roni Caryn. "Vaccinated Americans, Let the Unmasked Gatherings Begin (but Start Small)." *The New York Times*, 8 Mar. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/03/08/health/coronavirus-cdc-vaccinated-guidelines.html.

⁴ Philstar.com. "DepEd: Private Schools Can Hold Hybrid and Remote Classes Past November 2." *Philstar.com*, 17 Oct. 2022, www.philstar.com/headlines/2022/10/17/2217353/deped-private-schools-can-hold-hybrid-and-remote-classes-past-november-2.

⁵ Lieberman, Mark. "How Hybrid Learning Is (and Is Not) Working during COVID-19: 6 Case Studies." *Education Week*, 12 Nov. 2020, www.edweek.org/leadership/how-hybrid-learning-is-and-is-not-working-during-covid-19-6-case-studies/2020/11.

⁶ Magsambol, Bonz. "What Will Be the 'New Normal' in PH Education Post-Pandemic?" *RAPPLER*, 23 Oct. 2021, www.rappler.com/nation/what-will-be-new-normal-philippines-education-post-pandemic/.

⁷ St. George, Donna, et al. "How the Pandemic Is Reshaping Education." *Washington Post*, 15 Mar. 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/03/15/pandemic-school-year-changes/.

loved ones and past lives: in one form or another, new devices were installed, hybrid learning programs were packaged in catchy acronyms, and it was suddenly the bare minimum for every educator to know⁸ how to troubleshoot and facilitate activities for students on-site and online.

Like most new leaders, I sought steady mentorship and a few timeless blueprints to get me through the first months of these sudden shifts; however, it was evident that even the most seasoned of us were in the same boat when it came to navigating the academic year ahead and if anyone could offer support to a struggling colleague, it only felt right to extend it regardless of one's position. There was also a collective sense of warped time⁹ we all had to shake off after two years of being glued to our makeshift workspaces at home, but amid all the obstacles, the magic of it was witnessing how truly instinctive it was of every stakeholder to just focus on equipping the self with whatever strategies it took to deliver the best learning experience possible. With a newfound appreciation for our school's capacity to stay afloat¹⁰ during the worst peaks of the pandemic, no fingers were pointed and no voices were raised- everyone just had their head in the game.

But where's the offline button?

Just a few months before I officially took on the role of leading our department into the first on-site academic year since 2020, my father—a management consultant for over 40 years and a follower of Peter Drucker himself— had rapidly transitioned from a strong, 75-year-old who loved power walking and belting out songs in department stores, to a frail recipient of 16 daily medications with vulnerable lungs within 3 weeks. As challenging as it was to accept a senior position in the midst of a topsy-turvy world, nothing could ever prepare me enough for the leadership role I had to take on as both a breadwinner and daughter.

Hospital guidelines had prohibited me from going home or seeing my family unless they tested negative for Covid-19 and, to be honest, it was already immensely difficult to decide on whether or not to go home as each day that Dad was still alive felt like a

⁸ Morning Future. "The Teaching Profession: Post-Pandemic Skills in Demand." *Morning Future*, 8 Sept. 2021, www.morningfuture.com/en/2021/09/08/teachers-skill-competencies-post-covid/.

⁹ Cohen, Sandy. "Was That Yesterday or Last Week? The COVID-19 Time Warp Is Real." *www.uclahealth.org*, 22 Mar. 2022, www.uclahealth.org/news/was-that-yesterday-or-last-week-the-covid-19-time-warp-is-real.

¹⁰ Mateo, Janvic. "425 Private Schools Closed since 2020." *Philstar.com*, 20 Aug. 2022, www.philstar.com/nation/2022/08/20/2203802/425-private-schools-closed-2020-.

miracle, and I was stuck in an hourglass as life continued beyond the hospital doors. It is difficult to explain why I still felt compelled to show up for work despite my situation (to further clarify, I was relentlessly encouraged by my superiors to give primacy to my father's well-being at this time), but I believe it was simply the newfound accessibility to my students and colleagues that determined my availability.

Had these events transpired during the pre-pandemic years, I would have easily excused myself from work due to the gravity of the situation without a hint of guilt, but I was experiencing this during a gray area in history wherein everyone was carrying on under the worst circumstances, and so—along with thousands of grieving teachers around the world¹¹—classes continued as a loved one was slipping away right beside me.

I write this essay with what I perceive to be reasonable notes—from experience, and from Drucker—for leaders in education to consider as we proceed to deliver quality education alongside colleagues who are bruised from the losses in recent years and are hoping to rekindle their passion for teaching.

Drucker's Remedy for a Disrupted System

Having lived through post-World War 1 Vienna and a recovering economy¹², there is no doubt that Peter Drucker would be an ideal figure to consult post-pandemic as he possessed the kind of tenacity required of a leader confronting the aftermath of global disruption. In his book, "Managing in Turbulent Times", Drucker mentions that **"the first task of management is to make sure of its structure, strength and soundness of its capacity to survive the blow, to adapt to the sudden changes and to avail itself of the new opportunities."** [Emphasis added]. Before even considering preventive measures for potential crises to schools, it is essential to note that a variety of maladies (such as corruption, the lack of sufficient infrastructure, and outdated learning resources¹³, among others) have hounded Philippine education for decades, and these were only further aggravated by the pandemic. In a report made by the Philippines' Department of Education in January this year, out of 327,851 school buildings, only

¹¹ Gewertz, Catherine. "Exhausted and Grieving: Teaching during the Coronavirus Crisis." *Education Week*, 17 Apr. 2020, www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/exhausted-and-grieving-teaching-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/2020/04.

¹² British Library. "Peter Drucker: Father of Management Thinking." *The British Library*, 2012, <https://www.bl.uk/people/peter-drucker>.

¹³ Hernando-Malipot, Merlina. "DepEd Identifies Challenges in Basic Education through BER 2023." *Manila Bulletin*, 30 Jan. 2023, mb.com.ph/2023/01/30/depd-identifies-challenges-in-basic-education-through-ber-2023/.

104,536 are in good condition. And although one might assume that online learning would be the most convenient alternative to address these hindrances, it only takes a few clicks to realize that even more inconvenient realities such the country's notoriously slow internet¹⁴ and a lack of funding for appropriate learning devices widen the gap of accessibility to education even further. While I personally do not encounter these dilemmas on a daily basis in the private school where I work, I cannot help but wonder how many Filipino students' educational experiences are compromised due to these nuisances.

When certain limitations are beyond the scope of what we, as educational leaders, can act on within our realistic timeline, what do we prioritize then?

We continue to listen to the ultimate and most immediate resource we have: the team of teachers that we lead. We nurture, uplift, and meet them where they are. We recognize that in the same way we schedule visitations and have anecdotal records of major events in a student's life that may affect their performance, it is just as important to know if our teachers are going through a major life change that could have significantly shifted the way they value their profession. Just as any responsible teacher sounds the alarm for when a student has multiple absences from class, we must set systems in place to help and advise educators who have gone through troublesome or even traumatic situations. In addition to "pass the hat" efforts (which I personally have benefited from when my father passed away and remain immensely grateful for), we must consider long-term, non-negotiable provisions such as health care subsidy and accessibility to psychiatrists, nutritious and affordable food options, and meaningful recreational activities which allow teachers to decompress and also enjoy time with colleagues. These recommendations are not yet the reality for the greater majority of schools in the Philippines but I look forward to the day when it will become the norm.

To quote one of Drucker's most notable pieces of wisdom, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; **it is to act with yesterday's logic.**" [Emphasis added]. The reality we are faced with is that there is a need for schools to not just be student-friendly, but to be teacher-friendly in all aspects as there is an

¹⁴ Porcalla, Delon. "Philippines Internet 'Second Slowest' in Asean, Ranks 110th Worldwide." *Philstar.com*, 28 Dec. 2020, www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/12/28/2066612/philippines-internet-second-slowest-asean-ranks-110th-worldwide.

evident appeal beyond salary and workload that is offered nowadays by the wide range of remote work opportunities¹⁵, both locally and abroad.

It is essential for leaders of this time in history, characterized by hybrid work setups, to not only be competent in navigating the online tools to stay up-to-date but to also learn how to be fully present to those who are silently grieving or are in generally delicate circumstances in order to avoid being out-of-touch. There is no question of whether or not a team must be persistent in the face of obstacles, but ultimately a school leader's empathy and actions make all the difference on their teachers' determination to proceed in spite of potential downfalls in life. What I look back on with utmost gratitude is how I was not pressured to show up for my classes as my father's health deteriorated; on the other hand, it was definitely an internal struggle to contradict social norms I had grown up with wherein the most wounded soldier was often hailed the most honorable and the most qualified to lead. As mentioned in the first Drucker quotation presented by this essay, "*The executive who therefore tries to avoid weakness rather than make strength effective is a weak man himself.*" We must face the uncomfortable truth that the kind of effective leadership required by these times must yield more than that which is measurable.

Class dismissed

Throughout my first encounter with grief, I felt a very persistent need to show up for everybody at all times, simply because that is what I had been conditioned to believe about the extent of sacrifices that a teacher must make throughout their life. Such a mindset is not unusual to most leaders across disciplines as well, and it is often perceived as something admirable; however, as I look back, I realize that resilience is only beneficial when it doesn't propel you past your breaking point entirely. It is this realization that helped me in managing my own team when we had experienced turbulence in the workplace. These are the recommendations which I would like to raise to school leaders and administrators who may be reading this:

1. Encourage teachers to maintain healthy, realistic work-life boundaries (whether it's as "simple" as responding to queries only up to a specific time or

¹⁵ Morrison, Nick. "How the Pandemic Has Killed off Teaching as a Career." *Forbes*, 24 Mar. 2023, www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2023/03/24/how-the-pandemic-has-killed-off-teaching-as-a-career/?sh=6a6841371443.

encouraging them to be present at family milestones). This would be a welcome and much-appreciated reflection of how much an institution values its employees' right to quality time with family after work.

2. Nurture educators' multiple interests so that students can feel encouraged to discover theirs. Peter Drucker himself emphasized the added value of living a "total life,"¹⁶ which entails enriching all aspects of one's life in order to soften the blow of rejections or setbacks that an employee might encounter in one section of their life.
3. Make it a priority to consider both physical and mental well-being in teacher-centered programs.
4. Allow teachers to seize the advantages that come with remote work opportunities and do not hinder them from pursuing multiple streams of income for as long as it does not compromise the quality of their service as educators. As Drucker suggests, it is essential to create a "parallel career"¹⁷ that would allow an individual to fully unlock their potential. This should ideally be in a significantly different work setting from their current one.



¹⁶ Rosenstein, Bruce. "Living in More than One World: Peter Drucker on Work/Life." www.amanet.org, 24 Jan. 2019, www.amanet.org/articles/living-in-more-than-one-world-peter-drucker-on-work/life/.

¹⁷ Foster, Gary. "Managing Yourself into Your Second Half – Three Critical Steps." www.linkedin.com, 11 Oct. 2020, www.linkedin.com/pulse/managing-yourself-your-second-half-three-critical-gary-/.

A final note

Within the year of taking on a management position, my father had peacefully passed away and I had moved out; a replacement for one of our teachers had to be found halfway through the school year, and mental health concerns were a common cause for frequent absence from work across departments. Nobody said it out loud, but the data we gathered and presented never felt quite as important as the knowledge that everybody was showing up healthy and presenting their best selves with whatever energy they could muster. I assume that the same can be said of the years to come.

As I write this, it is the end of the academic year and I look back with both a sigh of relief and deep gratitude for all the support that I had received during tremendously challenging seasons which transpired. I understand that next year will be an entirely different ball game and that I will have to unlearn much of what I have adapted in the past, but regardless of the shifts beneath and around me that I can't foresee right now, I would like to give a virtual standing ovation to all teachers, school administrators, and staff who are collectively attempting to get students back on track in the learning process. Likewise, I tip my hat to both my father and Peter Drucker who—quite emphatically—sang the same tune on maintaining a holistic life that rolls with the punches but also values the self and others.