

Bouncing Back: A Journey from BFA to MBA

Peter Drucker Challenge, 2023

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PROLOGUE

Rain fell and washed down the sidewalks of Astoria, Queens as I returned home from the gym. It was March 11, 2020. Having built up an appetite from the workout, I made a quick stop at my usual sushi spot for takeout. As I waited for supper, I glanced at the restaurant's TV where bold letters filed across the screen: *NBA Halts Season, COVID Case Found Within the League*. COVID-19 up to that point had been a minimal intrusion into my life—short of the treasure hunts for toilet paper which had recently become the hot-ticket item all around town. There was something particularly daunting, however, about the TV message that night. My gut told me this headline was a curtain, sent crashing down towards my life, career, and industry.

Before the pandemic arrived, I was an actor. A musical theatre actor, singing and dancing my way towards small paychecks and big dreams. I held a BFA degree in Musical Theatre and had spent years performing around the country as well as touring the world on vast cruise ships. After close to a decade in the industry, I had earned more than 50 professional credits to my name. When COVID arrived in New York City, I returned to my (more spacious) hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, where I sheltered in place waiting for curves to flatten and life to quickly resume back to normal.

What I didn't know at the time was that I would indeed *not* be returning to normal or even to New York City anytime soon, and that my career as an actor was sunsetting. And I definitely could not have known about the unprecedented and exciting new venture on the horizon.

Three years ago, I left New York City as an actor. In three days, I will walk across the commencement stage as an MBA. Here is the journey I took to **Bounce Back**.

ACT 1

COVID COMES A KNOCKIN'

A decision without an alternative is a desperate gambler's throw

—Peter F. Drucker

To set the scene, we need to rewind to December 31, 2019. I was in Columbus, Ohio, performing a New Year's Eve showing of Travolta's *Saturday Night Fever*. It was such a fun performance—one that would eventually turn into the final performance of my career. I made an early departure from Ohio to New York City on New Year's Day to move into my newly rented apartment in Queens, over the moon about the two year lease I was able to negotiate with the landlord...I was also excited for the 2020 audition season, which was right around the corner. Mid-January through March is a hectic time for a stage performer, as all the theatrical companies from around the country flock to the Big Apple to hold their season auditions. I was feeling a momentum like none other that year. Auditions were going great, relationships were being built, and job offers were materializing. By mid-February, I had my entire year booked up with wonderful and reputable work from various companies. I was even in final callbacks to lead an all-new national tour as Motley Crue's Nikki Sixx, in a show based on Sixx's biographical book, *The Heroin Diaries: A Year in the Life of a Shattered Rock Star*.¹ It was going to be the biggest opportunity of my career. 2020 had me feeling that stars were aligning: it was my time.

COVID-19, however, became more and more ubiquitous by the day. My phone dinged nonstop with notifications of exploratory research, case numbers, and conspiracies. Masks started to cover the faces of my neighbors on the subway. I noticed in real-time, a shift towards fear in the public's sentiment towards the infectious disease. Still, I couldn't be bothered, there were bigger fish for me to fry. All I wanted to do was keep my head down and continue along this dream of an audition season. In time, though, auditions slowed and began to be cancelled, as companies no longer wanted to travel to New York City. Finally, before I knew it, companies started cancelling shows and rescinding offers—including the *Heroin Diaries* tour. I could no longer keep my busy head down.

In a flash, my successful 2020 audition season was gone; my booked opportunities were no more. I was left with nothing. You know that saying, "Everyone's got a plan until they get punched in the face?" Well, my plans and I were down for the count. Emotionally black and blue, I sank into lows that I had never felt before. I felt so sorry for myself. I felt angry for all my fellow actors that were sacrificing so much to pursue a dream that was now impossible to reach. Honestly, I felt cheated.

Back in St. Louis, I was stunned, broken and unsure what to do.

¹ Sixx, Nikki, and Ian Gittins. 2017. *The Heroin Diaries : A Year in the Life of a Shattered Rock Star*. New York, Ny: Gallery Books.

ACT 2

THE GREAT REASSESSMENT

The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic

— Peter F. Drucker

I wasn't alone in my workplace struggles. Whether it was burnout, location, or wage, millions of Americans were considering career changes when COVID reared its ugly head. For those impacted by job loss, a Pew Research Center survey found that, "66 percent of the unemployed had 'seriously considered' changing their field of work, a far greater percentage than during the Great Recession."²

Globally, more than 40% of people, "...who responded to Microsoft's Work Trend Index, a global survey of over 30,000 people in 31 countries," said they were considering leaving their employer in 2021.³

These numbers prompted The Washington Post to appropriately coin this era as "The Great Reassessment of Work," while others adopted "The Great Resignation."⁴

During this forced-stop in my career, I too began to ask what else life might have in store for me. In time, I pondered a complete leap from my industry.

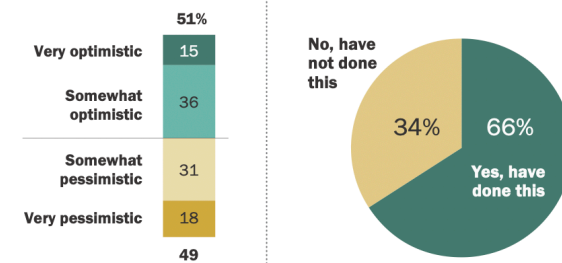
Throughout my busy career as a working actor, my big life decisions and strategic thinking were curtailed by hectic daily to-dos. I always had to be focused on the next audition, the next callback, the next role. When the pandemic erased those from my schedule, my perspective could finally begin to zoom out. Now, with a ten thousand foot view, I questioned whether acting and performing arts was the best path for me.

Unemployed adults have mixed views about their future job prospects; most say they've thought seriously about changing their field or occupation

Among unemployed adults, % saying ...

Their current outlook on finding a job in the near future is ...

That, since they have been unemployed, they seriously considered changing their occupation or field of work



Note: Based on adults who are unemployed, furloughed or temporarily laid off and who are currently looking for work. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 19-24, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

² Parker, Kim. "Unemployed Americans Are Feeling the Emotional Strain of Job Loss; Most Have Considered Changing Occupations." Pew Research Center, February 10, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/02/10/unemployed-americans-are-feeling-the-emotional-strain-of-job-loss-most-have-considered-changing-occupations/>.

³ Castrillon, Caroline. n.d. "Why Millions of Employees Plan to Switch Jobs Post-Pandemic." Forbes. Accessed May 20, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2021/05/16/why-millions-of-employees-plan-to-switch-jobs-post-covid/?sh=3ca363911e7e>.

⁴ "The Great Resignation: Everything You Need to Know." n.d. WhatIs.com. Accessed May 24, 2023. <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/feature/The-Great-Resignation-Everything-you-need-to-know#:~:text=Anthony%20Klotz%20coined%20the%20term>.

Not that asking these questions was easy. The shift into introspection and longterm thinking brought with it a certain level of anxiety and fear. Picturing what my life would look like five years or ten years down the road created an image I wasn't satisfied with. My outside life had become such a mad scramble that I had failed to see there was a misalignment between my current destination and what my heart actually wanted. The (much needed) stillness uncovered a desire I had within me to build things like a family legacy, a higher quality of life, and a broader impact with the time I had left—values that weren't exactly feasible with an actor's lifestyle.

Pre-pandemic, I could hardly find the time to take care of a plant, let alone start a family; and if you set aside the factor of time, my wandering home-base and fleeting finances were in no position to support one either. Similar to the way I would sweep casting calls in search of acting opportunities, I went on the hunt for a different kind of role, one which would allow me to live in accordance with my values. My research led me to the MBA degree. Not only would an advanced business degree give me both stability and freedom, it offered a salary I could only dream of as a working actor. With every conversation and connection I made, I became hungrier for the opportunity. Soon, I set my sights on admissions.

After months of staggering hard work—which included graduate program information sessions, recruiting, entrance exam preparation, applications, and interviews—I received my acceptance letter from a top-ranked university and program. I was now an MBA candidate.

ACT 3

MANAGING MYSELF
AS AN MBA

Successful careers are not planned, they develop when people are prepared for opportunities because they know their strengths, their method of work, and their values

—Peter F. Drucker

Prior to business school, I knew little about Peter Drucker and his philosophy on management. It is fulfilling, in hindsight, to compare the decisions I made during that time as it relates to Mr. Drucker's teachings, especially on the topics in his management playbook, *Managing Oneself*.⁵

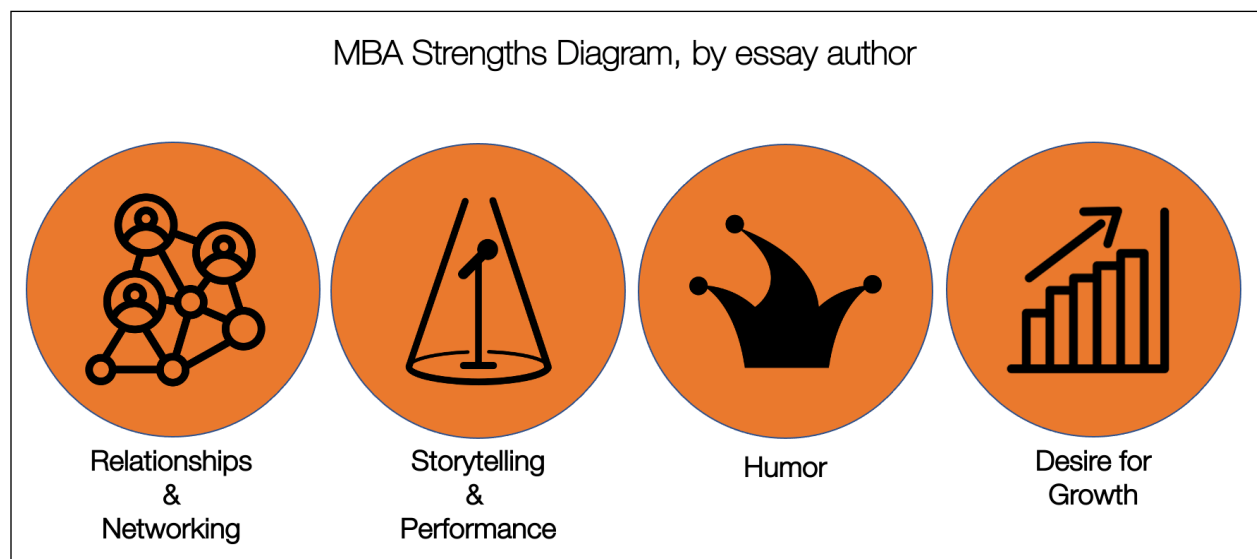
The first months of my MBA I felt like a fraud. And I was. I sat in classrooms and acted my way through interviews, pretending to be someone else, pretending to be like those in my cohort that had more of a traditional pathway into business school. I was insecure about what I had to offer, which meant I spent precious time using my skills as

⁵ Peter Drucker. 2017. *Managing Oneself: And What Makes an Effective Executive*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press. Copyright.

an actor to hide who I really was, instead of using my non-traditional background as an advantage to perform in a way that was different among everyone else.

Perhaps Mr. Drucker would have suggested I was capable of a performance that no other MBA had to offer.

My strategic shift was galvanized as a result of having *no results*. As my classmates secured internship offers, I instead collected rejections. *Managing Oneself*, a book prescribed in one of my early organizational behavior classes, heavily emphasizes the idea of leveraging strengths, especially at points of transition and change. The world of business and management can only be measured by performance, and I was neglecting my strengths that would allow me to perform stronger in this new arena. So, instead of trying to be someone I was not, I turned to where I was exceptionally gifted, locating tools from my prior career that would soon improve my performance as an MBA.



In *Managing Oneself*, Mr. Drucker discusses a three-point action plan: go where your strengths produce results, improve those strengths, and pursue skills you still need in order to succeed.⁶ Following this framework, I tapped into the skills I had spent years developing as an actor. There were four things my career in the performing arts taught me. The first is NETWORKING: There's a saying in Showbiz, "It's all about who you know," and it's very true. The industry is so saturated—and everyone is so good—that most of the time your job comes as a result of a strong relationship with the casting director. Any successful actor was well-versed in quickly establishing positive, lasting relationships with other people in the industry. Second is STORYTELLING: my former full-time job. Eight times a week, I would take the stage, evoking smiles, tears, and

⁶ Peter Drucker. 2017. *Managing Oneself: And What Makes an Effective Executive*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press. Copyright.

laughter in the audience, as I gave life to words on a page. Third is HUMOR: Speaking of laughter, I love to earn a giggle or a guffaw from a loved one or stranger, and I make it a goal of mine to hear as many of them as possible in the heavy and stressful worlds we all live in. Finally, GROWTH: I have independently paved my entire life path, as a result of constantly assessing my performance and learning from feedback. I consistently grew throughout my time in the musical theatre industry, and knew I could do the same as an MBA. Using these four elements as my toolkit, I turned around my MBA journey and began producing results. My network expanded at exponential rates; I was using my storytelling and performance skills by building immersive slide decks and delivering entertaining and moving business pitches and recommendations; and most of all, I was growing, and growing fast.

An additional step when managing oneself is asking, “Where do you belong?”⁷ To answer that question for myself, it was crucial that I connect the dots between the passion I had on stage as a performer and opportunities I might encounter in the corporate business world. Something that gave me fulfillment as an artist was the ability to tap into another person’s mind and take a deep dive into what makes them tick. I loved learning about someone’s perspective and answering questions like: what did they love?, what pained them?, and what did they want out of life? Drucker made a specific connection regarding this passion: “The aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well that the product or service fits and sells itself.”

All at once, things fell into place. My passion for human empathy, as well as my strengths as a storyteller, networker, and performer, had a translatable home in the realm of business. Using my action plan and assessing where the best environment was for my strengths to perform, I streamlined my attention, focus, and objectives towards marketing.

ACT 4

THE SECOND HALF

There is one prerequisite for managing the second half of your life: you must begin doing so long before you enter it

—Peter F. Drucker

Fast forwarding to present day, I am happy to say that not only did I make it out alive, I thrived as an MBA candidate. Refusing to act my way through business school any longer, I participated and won numerous case competitions, I led graduate student consulting projects for Fortune 500 companies, I spent my summer interning at one of the most competitive marketing firms in the world (one which I will be returning to full-

⁷ Peter Drucker. 2017. *Managing Oneself: And What Makes an Effective Executive*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press. Copyright.

time in July), and I even earned a grand distinction from my university as the recipient of the *Milford Bohm Prize in Marketing*—awarded to the graduating MBA student who, in the judgement of the faculty, exhibits the strongest academic achievement and the most potential in the field of marketing.

During one of my cohort's final engagements, I had a conversation with a classmate—who also switched careers—that I will carry with me for a long time. As we discussed job start dates and moving plans, Keerthi said something that impacted me deeply. He said, "Our life begins now." Four words that mean so much given everything I have gone through and experienced since that evening on March 11, 2020. I struggled for so long to see a brighter future for myself; however, what had felt like a closing performance, ended up only being a brief intermission. Now, as the lights come back up, I embark on my second career and prepare for the second half of my life; and I couldn't be more optimistic for the future. Three years ago I wouldn't have believed this, but I am grateful for the struggle. I am grateful for the theatrical jobs I wanted so badly being taken from me. That loss became my defining moment. It forced me to create an opportunity, to grow stronger and forever change my life for the better. Just as Mr. Drucker said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it."

Three years ago, I left New York City as an actor. In July, I will return, as an MBA Marketing Manager.

I'd take a bow, but the show has only just begun.

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