

HOW TO GLIDE OVER TSUNAMIS AND OTHER STORIES

“In times of peace, prepare for war.” - Vegetius

I must start with a confession. Although I'd heard of Peter Drucker, I had not read any of his books until very recently. I had not even considered the field of management as having much to do with me. I felt his books were for 'serious management gurus'. After all, I was only leading small teams of people in non-profit work and simply wanted to learn about doing the right things, the right way. For that, I was content with Jim Collins and had read four of his books repeatedly. I consider myself a student of Collins. I liked that he wasn't about fading fads but timeless, yet time-proven, empirical principles.

A few weeks ago, I picked up another Collins book and was surprised when I read him say Drucker was a hugely defining influence on him. I was astounded. Drucker was my mentor's mentor. He went on to write that executives at General Motors, HP, Merck, Procter and Gamble, Ford, General Electric, and Motorola had also been influenced by Drucker's thinking.

It was intriguing to realize I had been immersed in Drucker philosophy without realizing it. The next couple of days found me hungrily devouring Drucker's work. I found him shockingly prescient. In writing this essay, I set out to examine if the thoughts I'd refined over the years on chaos and change management were the same as Drucker's and if there were inspiring lessons from the pandemic that told a story of managing excellently through an unpredictable, unplanned crisis.

How do we prepare for an unknown enemy?

At the end of their seminal work examining thriving in chaos, Jim Collins and Morten Hansen wrote^a: “The premise behind this work is that instability is chronic, uncertainty is permanent, change is accelerating, disruption is common, and we can neither predict nor govern events. We believe there will be no 'new normal.' There will only be a continuous series of 'not normal' times. The dominant pattern of history isn't stability but instability and disruption”.

Those words were written over a decade ago, but they could as well have been uttered yesterday. We find the reason they still ring true when we look at history and see that disruptive change has always been the default environment. Although specifics are different, over the last few decades, people have faced sudden change on the same scale as we have. Imagine living when cars took over from horses, or when trains and railroads became pre-eminent, or even when the printing press was invented, reducing the time to produce books from years to

minutes. In hindsight, while we might underestimate the scale of change those before us faced, it is no less than what we will face.

So, in dealing with recent global uncertainties, we might add a couple more questions to the myriad we're already asking:

Are there timeless principles that have worked with managing tumultuous change over the years that we can apply?

How do we prepare for an unknown enemy?

From what I've observed, learned and practised, I want to share four simple ideas about preparing for and managing disruptive change in discrete, repeatable ways that can be learned and replicated. I would illustrate with personal anecdotes showing how I employed these principles personally to navigate through unplanned change.

I. Begin from within

I think the first step in preparing for or dealing with a crisis is to counter two extremes. The first is the idea that we are helpless in the face of unpredictably raging storms. The second is the temptation to attempt radical change on the inside just because there's a ton of change happening outside. There's pressure to be doing something, anything, as long as we're not static or slow-moving.

But that is the wrong move. The rate of change in the world is too much to keep pace with without getting pulled in several directions at once. Economies, markets, fashions, technologies, political landscapes, societal norms, regulations all change, sometimes at dizzying speed. We can't change with respect to all these things.

Taking control is as much about our state of mind as it is an action. In the middle of all this disruption, taking control means accepting full responsibility for our fate, recognizing that the results we would get largely depend on us and not any externalities. It means beginning from within, within the person, within the organization. This is the role of management in a crisis. As Drucker mentioned,^b "someone must have the authority to make the final decision and must clearly be in command in a crisis."

In the same book, Drucker writes: "Business-and every other organization- today has to be designed for change as the norm and to create change rather than react to it. The only policy likely to succeed is to try to make the future. The future is still malleable. It can still be created. To try to make the future is highly risky. It is less risky, however, than not to try to make it."

Without this first step of taking control, we give away the responsibility to direct change to external whims. When we realize that the onus rests on us and not the uncontrollable situation outside, and think of what we can do, we begin to become aware of our creative power to direct our course of action and create our future.

In June last year, six weeks after a nationwide lockdown, my department was suddenly shut due to the pandemic and I was let go unexpectedly. I was immediately plunged into uncertainty. It was unanticipated because my industry, food processing, was one of the few thriving and we did not expect job losses at the time.

I could not control the loss of my job or my country's fragile economic environment at the time. But I could control my response, and it was empowering to discover I had so many ways I could respond. I saw it as an opportunity to take a well-needed break, learn, and relaunch my career. It ended up being a time of great experimentation and creativity. Viewing things from this lens gave me a new perspective, new drive, and showed me how powerful I was once I focused on the things I could control.

When we accept that the ability to choose our response in the face of disruptive change opens up a new vista to us, how do we scale this across organizations and manage change? How do we design our organizations to be prepared for disruptions as a norm?

II. Build clocks, instead of time tellers^c

A clock is a device with an internal mechanism for always telling the time correctly. A time teller is one that finds out the right time when asked. In this context, a clock is a team or company that has an internal mechanism that adapts to anything the market throws at it. A time-teller is a company, product or service that wins the market once, twice, or for a certain period but cannot adapt to constantly changing upheavals.

To design our organizations to thrive in disruptive change as the norm, we need to develop the internal mechanism that makes us clocks. This means we deliberately aim to build a team or company that is always innovating. This means the team or company is the first creation, not the product or the customer. This does not mean we do not focus on the product or customer. We simply realize instead of having one or two innovations, we want to build something that guarantees a steady stream of innovative products or customer-tailored service irrespective of the external environment.

We consciously create a system that democratizes and rewards creativity: allowing people the freedom to make decisions and mistakes and encouraging them along the way. Drucker agrees,

stating “We long ago learned that an organization will not innovate unless innovators are properly rewarded.”

We can’t see around corners or predict the next pandemic. The good news, however, is that we don’t need clairvoyance. We just need a system that has a genuinely inventive culture and the discipline to rigorously execute. This culture of constant exploration and tinkering leads to evolutionary change, leading to a stream of products. When a crisis comes to this type of company, we are quick to adapt because, in times of calm, we have developed mental independence, entrepreneurship, confidence in our abilities and the discipline to execute.

Find, empower, and reward people who turn innovation into a systematic, repeatable process. Build an organization that builds clocks that in turn always tell the time. Instead of being right once, build a company that is always right. That’s how to thrive through a pandemic.

I applied this discipline of mental independence and systematic innovation in my former job as a veterinarian, using it to continually design new ways of reducing churn and providing seamless onboarding for customers. I found it even more applicable to my life when I was trying to determine what to do after I lost my job. Although there were opportunities to jump back into veterinary practice, my mental models told me that was the wrong route to take. I set out on a period of experimentation that ranged from learning different programming languages and skills to long periods of introspection.

After thinking and tinkering, I was able to hone in on a field where all my skills and experiences converged and made them a superpower. That’s how I transitioned to product management. There is no straight line from veterinary medicine to product management. I could only have arrived here because even when I had a job, I had built mental systems that allowed me the creativity and discipline to explore and examine and determine what the best investment of my life was.

After building clocks, what do we do next?

III. Pre-mortems: planning for the worst

When I started my product management journey, I learned about the concept of pre-mortems. Before we launch a product, we run this exercise. As opposed to a post-mortem that tells us the cause of death, during pre-mortems we try to think of all the things that could go wrong and assume that all of them will go wrong at once, crippling our product and business. We repeat this process many times over the lifecycle of the product, going to the extremes in our imagination.

But we do not stop there. We channel our paranoia productively to creatively figure out how to survive (in) those extreme situations. We find ourselves coming up with the most creative, resilient ideas. We may not be able to predict the future but this way, we find that when trouble eventually comes, we are already ‘vaccinated’ against it because we anticipated and took precautions.

This practice keeps us cautious even in calm, good, positive conditions. We know that conditions can turn against us so we are on guard. We don’t wait until a crisis before we realize the need for better preparation. We always stay prepared. That way, if conditions turn against us, we can draw from a deep reservoir of strength and planning. And equally, if conditions turn in our favour, we can strike hard.

But there’s a corollary. We build for ourselves a culture of measured, consistent growth based on our projections. This way, we don’t overexert ourselves. This measured, consistent growth in both good and bad times helps us build confidence in our abilities because we earn confidence from actual achievements. This confidence is what helps us set measured goals.

What pre-mortems help us achieve is to build a reservoir of oxygen canisters before the storms come and this preparation reduces the likelihood of us being hit by ‘bad luck.’ If we have buffers in place, we’re more likely to survive catastrophic incidents.

Before I even understood the concept of pre-mortems, I was already applying this principle before I lost my job. While the going was good, I regularly took personal assessments on preparing for the unknown. I assumed that my job could be lost at any time. I assumed that I would be out of work for a while, unable to get another job. Then I channelled my paranoia productively. I established different saving funds, benchmarking and meeting my monthly targets consistently. I also invested in personal development in an entirely different field. I started learning Python programming, data science and artificial intelligence, going for boot camps and participating in hackathons while I had a stable job. I knew one day, I may have to make a sudden switch, so I was preparing so that it would not catch me unawares.

IV. Determine your ‘unchanging unchangeables’

In a changing world, what do you hold on to?

I think there are two things that you should keep steady. The first is the customer. Keeping our eyes on the customer's needs and wants and anticipating their future needs is a sure way to keep our eyes on track. As long as we are meeting and anticipating the customer, we would keep them happy. In Drucker's words, "Increasingly the same want is satisfied by very different means. It is the want that is unique, and not the means to satisfy it. Wants are unique. Your customers' needs are unique. But the means to meet their needs and satisfy them is not. You can satisfy them in any number of ways. News used to be the monopoly of the newspaper but it no longer is. There are now several competing ways to deliver the news. Find a different way to deliver the value that is demanded by your customers' wants."

The second is your *raison d'être*, the reason you exist as an individual or business. When I lost my job and I sat back to decide on what to move on to, I used the '5 Whys principle*'. I asked myself "Why are you doing this job?" and repeated the question to the answer of the previous one. By the time I was done, I gained the insight that what I enjoyed most about my former job, what I wanted to be about, irrespective of job role was to help people live fuller, richer lives and get out of poverty.

Companies and teams can also practise this and use the '5 Whys' to discover their core purpose. This helps them pivot without losing their sense of mission. A newspaper company may realize that its core purpose is to share timely information and insights with its customers. This means they can pivot from papers to digital without losing focus or customers.

When you combine understanding the customer and knowing your purpose, you can pivot successfully several times without getting lost. To you, you're doing the same thing and achieving the same goal. You're just aware that methods can change and you're open to that.

Putting It All Together

I believe that all these principles can be learned, even more so in this digital age. Digital natives are used even much more adapted to dizzying change than the generation before them. No one is born with this knowledge. We must all learn it by experience or by observation. When we know our *raison d'être*, follow the customer and then combine these with the practice of independent thinking, building an organization of independent thinkers allowed to give free rein to their creativity and then introduce pre-mortems that fuel productive paranoia and disciplined goal-setting, we would be surprised at the fact that nothing takes us by surprise. We have built a culture of innovation that is prepared for anything. And that is enough. That is how you glide over tsunamis.

In Conclusion

“In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity” -Albert Einstein

Citation

A- Great by Choice: Why Some Companies Make the leap and others don't. Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen. 2011

B- Managing Challenges for the 21st Century. Peter F. Drucker. 1999

C- Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies. Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras. 1994. HarperBusiness Publishers