

2017 Peter Drucker Challenge

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Title: Management's Role in Maximising Human Potential

My mother moved to South Africa in pursuit of a better life.

I was eight, and she left me behind to be educated at home in Zimbabwe. This splitting of our family of two at the time had a major impact on me as I was merely a child. I began moving from school to school, and as I often was not granted a boarding place,

moving from family to family became the new norm for me. My reality changed from 'only child' to 'the cousin' and from having a thriving circle of friends to being the 'new kid' at school, all in a short space of time. As a result, my free-spirited and fun personality quickly became repressed with feelings of inadequacy and incapacity. Though I was kind-hearted, intelligent and talented, the environments in which I found myself were un conducive to the manifestation of my potential and abilities.

I am 22 years old now and recently graduated with a Bachelor of Business Science degree, my first, from the University of Cape Town. I believe that I am now no longer afraid to express myself and that my goofy sense of humour, confidence, tender-heartedness and intelligence are nearly fully exuded through my personality. I am not implying that I have exhausted all my potential – barely so. Rather, it is no longer static within me. I am no longer reliant on external encouragement to contribute the best of myself per time, neither am I at the mercy of the reigning circumstances at any stage.

My transformation from childhood can be attributed to various factors. My mother eventually returned home and remarried when I was thirteen to a man I regard fully as my father today. I am now an older sister to a boisterous four year old boy whose energy reminds me of mine in my early years, and our father's guidance has been pivotal in our development, particularly in my maturing into the mentally, emotionally and spiritually empowered young woman that I am today.

In a way, one could say that I have been under my father's management for the last decade. In my opinion, my father's role in my life is parallel to the role of management in freeing up human potential. I shall further explore these two parallels with reference to other observations, including those of the iconic thought leader, Peter Drucker.

Human Prosperity in a Changing World

We live in a constantly changing world for which change is packaged differently for varying peoples and parts of the world. Globalisation has transcended the bounds of economics and trade, and is now more evident socially and culturally. Closer to home, the Zimbabwean economy has taken a few blows of its own. We were once dubbed, 'the breadbasket of Africa', but have since experienced hyperinflation (2008), dollarization (2009), and more recently, have seen the rolling out of a new 'currency' - the 'Bond note' (2016). Change is inevitable and thus it is imperative that human beings are equipped to thrive when it occurs. Drucker once wrote, "...unless an organisation sees that its task is to lead change, that organisation – whether a business, a university, or a hospital – will not survive." Hence for humans to prosper, such is the role of management or those deemed to be so in any institution, organisation or setting, and at any level, anywhere in the world – to lead change.

From the above, one might ask, 'What does leading change look like?' I do not believe that there is a formula to leadership – especially to that of 'leading change', as change itself is found in unchartered waters. The thought of a formula reminds me of my time at university. My degree specialization was in Finance and Accounting, and it was then that I came to know of the ideology, 'management's role is to maximise shareholder value'. Over time I came to understand that the same ideology often culminates in

selfish behaviour by management, poor performance and the neglect of subordinates' unique potential and contributions to the wellbeing of the organisation. Ultimately, it results mostly in a 'lose-lose' situation for all who are involved. I therefore do not believe that the one-size-fits-all approach of maximising shareholder value works, applied to any setting.

What I believe though, is that managing anything, especially people, requires a proactive approach. My father took such an approach when, upon discovering, when I was thirteen, my lack of confidence, self-awareness and ambition, he started making efforts in my teenage years to ensure that I improved my self-image and hence developed into the fullness of who I truly am. I believe that his efforts have empowered me to work towards being prosperous in every aspect and circumstance. True prosperity of nations, organisations and people is all-encompassing, and as my father did, management (whether they are given the official title of 'manager' in any setting or not) should strive to develop their subordinates up to the point of empowerment. In my opinion, being empowered is being able, in every respect, to adequately leverage one's own or another's position of power, regardless of a change in circumstance.

Zimbabwe possesses a wealth of mineral reserves; the most popular include platinum, gold and diamonds. While still buried deep within the earth, these minerals are not of any use – to be valuable they must be identified, extracted and refined to be suitable for their intended use. The process of mining and refining minerals can be compared to that which management should do. That is, they should focus on identifying and extracting untapped potential within their subordinates. This would result in the empowerment of such subordinates, and in turn, other benefits to management, the organisation and society as a whole, for instance, in the form of increased productivity and innovation. To further assert this train of thought I shall borrow from Peter Drucker something he said which greatly inspired the rest of the thoughts that I shall share with you:

'The task of the executive is not to change human beings. His task is to multiply the performance capacity of the whole by leveraging the strengths of individual employees.'

Awareness

Having grown up in a society where thousands risk their lives illegally searching for and trading minerals, particularly diamonds, I have a relatively deep understanding of how valuable they are. For a diamond miner in Chiadzwa, (an area in Zimbabwe notorious for illegal mining activities) to be able to extract a mineral from the earth, awareness of its existence and potential value is necessary. This in itself is enough to keep them motivated to keep persevering during the difficult task of extracting the precious stone. The same can be said of management – to be able to extract and free up human potential, they should firstly have an awareness and understanding of its value. Without an appreciation of the contribution of his/her subordinates, a manager may fail to take the necessary steps for the effective maximisation of their potential.

In my own case, my father did not fail on this point at all. On the contrary, he saw potential in me even when I could not. All through high school, when he used to drop me off at school every Monday morning (as I was a weekly boarder) he used to tell me,

“Your future is bright and colourful – you must get there!” I had always considered myself a bright student, but recall that because of the initial impact of my father’s weekly practice I began aspiring to be one of the best, and at the end of my first year of high school, I received a certificate of ‘Academic Achievement’ – I had obtained the examination results in my stream.

Identification

Identifying where exactly a specific mineral is located is imperative for a miner’s success in extracting it. Likewise, a manager should identify, over time, the strengths, talents and weaknesses unique to each of his subordinates. When I was a teenager my father started observing me closely. I recall often stubbornly rejecting the idea that ‘I had an inferiority complex’ – something he used to gently explain to me from time to time. Also, when I started thinking about my career plans, my father would often sit me down and ask me questions such as, ‘What do you want to do with your career?’ Initially the answer was almost always different to the last, and was delivered with an air of naivety and thoughtlessness; ‘a gynaecologist’, ‘I want to be in charge of all the money in the world’, ‘an inventor’, but as he repeatedly asked the same question over the years, I found that I had begun searching for the answer within myself. As time went on my responses became more consistent; ‘I want to work in business, ‘I want to create something useful and make money from it’, ‘I’ve discovered the word entrepreneur and I think I want to be one’. Asking the same searching question allowed my father to create deliberate opportunities to develop the relevant strengths and attributes necessary for my chosen career path.

According to Drucker:

‘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. Knowing where one belongs can transform an ordinary person – hardworking and competent but otherwise mediocre – into an outstanding performer.’

My father’s actions and Drucker’s abovementioned thoughts on successful careers can be applied to any management setting. If managers are intentional and persistent in identifying their subordinates strengths and talents, it is easier for them to develop more suitable opportunities for the effective development of talent.

Extraction

For many Zimbabwean illegal miners, extracting minerals from the earth is a gruelling task, especially in the absence of specialized machinery necessary for the process to be as efficient as possible. For instance, increasingly harsh weather conditions due to global warming and improved regulation around illegal mining makes it quite challenging for one to succeed at it. Similarly, it can be extremely challenging for managers to ‘extract’ their subordinates’ potential should the related work environment be unconducive for the task. In a professional setting, organisational culture plays a major role in the kind of talent that is attracted to the organisation, and more importantly in the employees’ contribution. Simply put, if employees are intimidated, they will not speak

up. I am currently a part of the 'interview process' of some of the big four accounting firms in Zimbabwe, and thus far the one that stands out the most to me has, among other qualities, a proven open door policy that has been established by the partners. Through my interaction with the firm's partners and employees over the last few months, it is evident that an entrepreneurial spirit reigns in the firm, particularly because the employees are comfortable enough to fully express themselves and their ideas at work. Drucker once pointed out that he was "yet to find a man, however exalted his station, who did not do better work and put forth greater effort under a spirit of approval than under a spirit of criticism." Thus not only should management ensure that their work environments are harmonious (where relevant) but they should strive for the same in their relations with their subordinates.

Refinement

Extraction is a milestone, but is hardly the end of the process. One of the most important steps is that of refinement, which, for different minerals is carried out under different circumstances. Some minerals are sieved, cut and polished while others, in addition, are burnt in furnaces to remove impurities. Managers should put their subordinates through a process of 'refinement'. That is, ask for their opinion, delegate certain duties to them and allow them to lead certain projects, where possible.

When my parents discovered my interest in business, they began giving me business and self-help books. For instance, my father gave me 'Africa's Greatest Entrepreneurs' by Moky Makura and my mother printed out and bound the free pdf of 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People', a personal favourite, by Stephen Covey. I must have been fourteen when my father gave me capital to start any business of my choice, and I remember selling fizzy drinks and popcorn after church on Sundays. Eventually, using the profit from that business and an additional injection of capital and stock from my mother, I began selling small speakers to my schoolmates and teachers. All these experiences helped me to actualise and practically develop my strengths, as well as identify my weaknesses. Ultimately, I am confident that I have the ability to pursue my dreams, adapt to changing circumstances and contribute positively to the world, wherever I end up. The above were exercises in self-knowledge, and as Peter Drucker rightly asserted, 'Today knowledge has power. It controls access to opportunity and advancement'.

In conclusion, and in reiteration of the reigning message of this essay:

Management has a pivotal role to play in the continual endeavour of mankind to live full, prosperous lives. One of their most important tasks is to extract and create opportunities for the development of their subordinates' potential. This done, whether in a home, school, professional or recreational setting, is set to result in the empowerment of humans and ultimately the maximisation of human potential, even in changing circumstances.

