

## Adventures of a Renaissance Manager

It is night and we are alone, in a room full of corpses.

No need saying that I am questioning the quality of choices that led us here.

However, I pursue.

I am determined to learn what it takes to be a Renaissance Manager. Be prepared for an adventure, for we shall go off the beaten track. Today we only have two mentors to learn from, but we are blessed to learn from the best. They are both regarded to be embodiments of Renaissance thought.

Even if dissecting corpses isn't something I would expect from a Renaissance luminary that is Leonardo da Vinci... well, nobody is perfect! By the way, Leonardo looks nothing like his famous gloomy portrait. He is amiable, good-looking – some say that the famous Vitruvian man is Leonardo himself,<sup>1</sup> and wears a short pink tunic that was probably an audacious fashion statement back in 1495.

Eventually it turns out that we are not witnessing some sort of a black magic ritual that would finally explain how Leonardo got all his talents. It is an anatomic study, and we are on the verge of making a discovery that humanity will prove right 500 years later.<sup>2</sup> And though – alas! –Leonardo kept most of his discoveries secret, his acquaintance with corpses definitely helped him create the unbelievably accurate portrayals of people in his paintings.

Leonardo was adamant about making art realistic. He believed that you can only become an artist after rigorous studies of the laws of nature. Nature is diverse, so Leonardo called his colleagues for representing different types of people in their works. He craved for proper variety of shapes in art, so that “all men (in one painting) do not look like brothers”.<sup>3</sup>

Nature is neither good or evil. It is a circulation of life and death, and an observant student soon learns that these two are inseparable.

When I first read heart surgeon's Francis Wells' impressions of seeing da Vinci's anatomical works, I had a nervous laugh. “They were beautiful, accurate, absorbing – and there was a liveliness to them that you just don't find in modern anatomical drawings”.<sup>4</sup> Liveliness is definitely not the first word that comes to my mind to depict dead bodies. But I know what he means. Leonardo never turned away from examining death – and it gave him the knowledge necessary to convey life better.

Now we must leave Leonardo's cabinet. 400 years fly in a glimpse of an eye. We are in the brawling streets of Vienna. Everybody pretends to not see a prostitute, who has her

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<sup>1</sup> Toby Lester “Da Vinci's Ghost: The untold story of Vitruvian Man” (2011)

<sup>2</sup>Francis C. Wells “The Heart of Leonardo” (2013)

<sup>3</sup>Daniel Smith “How to Think Like da Vinci” (2015)

<sup>4</sup>Also Francis C. Wells “The Heart of Leonardo” (2013)

stand at the street corner. Everybody but one old woman, who wishes her a good evening and says, "It's a cold wind tonight, Miss Lizzie. Do you have a warm scarf and is it wrapped tight?". Miss Lizzie is hoarse, and Grandmother crawls up the five flights to her apartment and back to bring cough drops for Miss Lizzie. "But Grandmother, to bring her cough drops", remonstrated one of her stuffier nieces. "Nonsense," Grandmother said, "Being courteous is never improper. You always worry about the horrible venereal diseases the men get from these girls. I can't do anything about that. But I can at least prevent her from giving a young man a bad sore throat."<sup>5</sup>

By no means do I compare a prostitute with Leonardo's corpses. But as a phenomenon they do share one very important characteristic: they were there, but everybody would pretend to not notice them, not to mention examining them. As a result, it was impossible to fight prostitution in Vienna, because to bring up that case you had to admit that you witnessed it. What a disgrace! What does that say about you? We can guess that the more respected you were, the more harm you could do to yourself.

Farewell Vienna.

Years pass.

We stand in awe as we see Grandmother's little grandson grow into a young man. His name is Peter. Peter Drucker. He is about 30 years old and is filled with enthusiasm as he gets a chance to study General Motors' internal structure.

He quickly grasps processes that made GM one of the greatest companies in the world. However, he cannot but also notice many "ill" processes that endanger the company. He sees the corpse! Many years later Peter would write "There is nothing as difficult and as expensive, and also nothing as futile, as trying to keep a corpse from stinking".<sup>6</sup>

From our perspective, it was Peter's duty to point out the ill policies to General Motors. But it was even more caring of him to warn other companies.

We can see history repeating itself. Peter's grandmother was worried about other people catching disease. After General Motors refused to see that corpse in the room, Peter could at least prevent other companies from getting "a bad sore throat". What is very important, neither Peter or his Grandmother blamed people for illnesses. Drucker blamed processes and structures, not individuals.

Every 5 to 10 years, the world is shaken by the news of fraud like Enron or Theranos. We can only imagine how many people have chosen to stay quiet after noticing the corpse. But these are some big examples. I believe that at some point of his or her life every manager comes across a situation where he is the first to notice the corpse. It then becomes his duty to warn his company that nothing good will come out of beating a dead horse. Or to warn society.

"Corpses" become a litmus test for manager's honesty. If you refuse to see the real state of things, your company will have to go blindfolded. Answering Drucker's famous

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<sup>5</sup>Peter Drucker "Adventures of a Bystander" (1998)

<sup>6</sup>Peter Drucker "The Effective Executive. The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done" (2006)

questions – among which “What should we STOP doing” – requires a great deal of honesty.

Leonardo da Vinci insisted that there is a great difference between seeing and looking. Peter Drucker advised always starting with the question “What is the world really like?”.<sup>7</sup>

Honesty is the art of seeing the world clearly and staying true to that vision. And It is the first trait we learn from Renaissance.

Holistic view does not only mean that you do not draw harsh lines between spheres, become a polymath and do both art and science. In the beginning, it's about seeing the good, the bad and the terrible – and learning to use the terrible for the good.

How can one be sure that his or her sight is not clouded? First of all, you have to step outside the box to see the bigger picture. And to free yourself of comfy concepts that tempt you into distorting the picture you see.

Being an outsider sharpens your visions. You were not raised into a particular way of thinking or behaving and you don't have to deal with what seems a betrayal of your colleagues when proving their works wrong. You are placed outside the system – and it is easier to have a full view.

Leonardo took pride in being an outsider. He was an illegitimate son, never mastered Latin and referred to himself as an “un-lettered man”.

Drucker's memoirs are called “Adventures of a Bystander”. The very first experience he recalls has to do with freedom and loneliness one feels when deliberately stepping outside the system.<sup>8</sup> It is a delightful and honest story.

Drucker was an outsider in many ways. He knew it and often joked about it. For example, he declared that there is only one point on which the economists and he are in agreement: he is NOT an economist. He saw his strength in being an outsider and knowing just enough about the company to ask the right questions.

In fact, being a manager presumes being both being an insider – and a deliberate outsider. I could not put it better than a traditional Ukrainian wish that you make a bride on her wedding. You wish her to have three eyes: one – to see her husband like society sees him, second – to see him like he sees himself, third – to see him like no one sees him (i.e. see his potential). It was believed that she needed to use all three eyes in order to manage the family well. This magical vision was also called “eagle sight”. This is exactly what we should wish managers on their first day on a new job.

Maybe this is where both Leonardo's and Peter's admiration of birds comes from? Being an outsider gives you both eagle sight and wings. You are free and you possess the greatest strengths of humbleness, audacity to make mistakes and a childish sense of awe.

Here comes our next lesson.

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<sup>7</sup>Peter Drucker “Managing in Turbulent Times” (2006)

<sup>8</sup>Also Peter Drucker “Adventures of a Bystander” (1998)

Mastering the subtle art of sfumato.

One of the most “eureka” moments in my life must be discovering the mystery of Mona Lisa. Why does this woman have such power over our hearts and imagination? What keeps generation after generation thrilled to unravel the secret of her smile?

It turns out, sfumato might answer it all.

Sfumato was one of Leonardo’s most genius inventions. He described it as fog without lines and borders. Sfumato is very much similar to the way newborns see the world – and also the way people see their loved ones. The lack of sharpness and soft focus in close-ups gives us a sense of presence and intimacy.<sup>9</sup>

I believe that both Drucker and Da Vinci observed the world through the lense of sfumato. In a broader sense, sfumato stands for awe, curiosity, love – and a pinch of self-irony.

This is what leads to a praised Renaissance holistic approach. You do not just sit and program yourself to study everything that a delectably diverse world has to offer. When you explore the world through sfumato lens, so many things are appealing to you that your thought wanders – and insights get naturally brought from one sphere to another. This is a ubiquitous process this days, when sports strategies inspire management methodologies, and art infuses business thinking.

Leonardo was intrigued by language of the birds and the nature of laughter.<sup>10</sup> Drucker was a Japanese art connoisseur. For some reason both reveled in water (to be more precise, puddles).<sup>11</sup> But most of all, they were interested in humanity.

Undying sfumato will keep you going, even when you get a little depressed about mistakes humanity makes.

I remember first meeting Peter Drucker at an economics lesson devoted to John Maynard Keynes. I was very much moved by a revelation that Drucker felt uneasy when it seemed to him that Keynes was interested in the move of commodities, while Peter was far more interested in people. Feeling the same way, I read every Drucker’s book I could find, and he offered me a helping hand ever since.

Much has changed since our first meeting. Back then I was a 16-year-old Ukrainian exchange student in New York. I had an opportunity to start my own business as a winner of Young Entrepreneurs Academy’s Investor Panel – and I was horrified. Everything I knew about entrepreneurship in Ukraine wasn’t very encouraging. My grand grandfather was actually sentenced to death for being an entrepreneur during the times of Soviet Union. Of course, I wasn’t afraid of being punished by the government – I was afraid that I would be punished by my mistakes. Drucker was a remedy to me.

I returned to Ukraine and went on to study International Economic Relations (albeit keeping loyalty to focus on people, not commodities).

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<sup>9</sup>Mark Cousins “The Story of Looking” (2017)

<sup>10</sup>Also Daniel Smith “How to Think Like da Vinci” (2015)

<sup>11</sup>Also Peter Drucker “Adventures of a Bystander” (1998)

When I was 19, my brother and I started a business. Drucker was there to mentor.

Today I am 24 and – to my shock - made it to the list of Ukraine's Top-25 young entrepreneurs. This was largely due to the list of our business' clients which includes great corporations like Red Bull, Philips and Unilever.

I am still scared, to be honest. But I try to not look away from the "corpses".

Several years ago Drucker was introduced to Ukrainian readers. It's about time, for Ukraine is going through changes and making its first attempts in deliberately applying human-oriented management to all aspects of life. I cannot name a sphere where Drucker's lessons would not be applicable, be it healthcare or fighting corruption.

May we all be/have managers who

- see ~~the corpse~~;
- strive to be outsiders;
- are Jedi in the subtle art of sfumato.

For these skills are vital for the liberal art that is Renaissance Management.