

Everyone is Invited

I was in awe when I found out that people in ancient Egypt once put dead mice in their mouths to ease toothache.¹

One would think those ideas only existed in folktales. Reading about the people of ancient Egypt proved me wrong. Whoever started that movement remains unknown till date but the idea spread only because at the time, the people thought it would work.

I heard a similar story recently; the story of a famous New York City physician known for his skill as a diagnostician and his specialty in typhoid fever. He examined patients for typhoid fever by feeling around their tongues with his hands. Again and again, his testing yielded a positive diagnosis even before the patient displayed a single symptom. And everytime he did, his diagnosis turned out to be correct. Many thought he was a genius till another physician later pointed out that, "He was a more productive carrier, using only his hands, than Typhoid Mary." Repetitive success, it turned out, taught him the worst possible lesson.²

It's simple, you see. Humanity since its inception has always been in search of solutions to its problems, this search has often led us to go to seemingly extreme lengths. Our belief in an ideology or system remains as long it appears to work. So, because it works, we believe we understand what makes it work, ignoring other 'obvious' related factors.

The Great Debate

Early in my life I decided there are many arguments I didn't think were worth my time. One of those arguments, the earliest I can remember is the cliché 'the sciences are better than the arts'.

For students in high school, this was a common debate and it got more intense as they approached the stage of choosing a field of specialization. Most schools in Nigeria have the senior high school divided into four specializations: Arts, Commercial (which includes Business and Social Sciences), Science, and Technical.

The generally accepted notion was that the sciences were better than the arts. And in defence of the sciences, the students always pointed to the rigourousness of their academic course work. The art students also make the same case. From reading pages of

literature, to writing lines of poetry, explaining dramatic techniques and understanding character roles. The basis of both arguments was; who put in much more effort and which field appeared to bring more valuable societal contribution.

As I look back at those times, I can't help but think of how those debates helped enforce certain biases that tilted young people towards seeing these different fields as competitive and not necessarily complementary. When it was time to choose a field, I chose the Business and Social Sciences department because I didn't find sciences appealing enough and I avoided the arts too because it appeared it was for those who weren't smart enough. Often teachers threatened students who weren't doing well that they'd be sent to arts class like it was a place for those who were doomed and they expressed disapproval for people who seemed to have the potential to do sciences but opted to go to arts class. That's the world I grew up in; a world where people had to belong to one class -hopefully science- if they were good enough. A world where people felt science was all that mattered.

Also society's expectations never helped with prominent career paths such as medicine, law, engineering; deemed as the only noble paths to take. Surely our teachers and parents knew better than us or in their words "they just wanted the best for us". Or maybe they hadn't just seen or heard the words of Leonardo Da Vinci, "Study the science of art. Study the art of science. Develop your senses — especially learn how to see. Realize that everything connects to everything else."

Do we really have to pick between Art and Science?

I still remember the look on his face like it happened yesterday, when I told him, "It's okay, you don't have to pick anything yet, there's still time to figure this out." I had volunteered for a teenagers camp and this was a conversation with one of the teenagers. He was two years away from finishing high school and spoke about the constant pressure from his parents to have a reasonable response to the 'What do you want to do when you grow up' question. He had some inclination towards arts - drawing comic characters and he also had an inclination to computer science. I happily told him he could do both, that the world has evolved beyond settling for one thing. Overtime, I've realised that while arts and science seem to be on the opposite end of the spectrum, they are complementary.

From art we learn to empathize with people and use the world around us to generate new ideas. From science we learn to understand systems, the journey to explain how the world around us works leads us to find solutions to existing problems.

The elevator for example looks like a purely mechanical device, it's easy to forget they were deemed as being too slow until someone suggested adding reflective surfaces to

the interior so that people riding could stare into it and easily forget that they're on a ride up or that the elevator was slow. That there is a case of arts complementing science. Steve Jobs summed this up well when he said "Technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that makes our hearts sing."

Growing up in Nigeria, the ideal expectation is that you'd pick one thing you love-choose to do and ride that wave till you die. How dare you think of dabbling in both? You'd be seen as crazy or unserious. Many people are known to only quote the beginning of the adage "jack of all trades, master of none." However, not familiar with the rest of the saying: "Oft' times better, than a master of one."

What about the specialists?

I haven't forgotten about them, the world is where it is today due to the advent of specialisation, different people focusing on their strengths which are weaknesses to other persons. I came across a specialist once during a job interview, the interview was going pretty well until he asked me a question.

"Can you stay in this role doing the same thing for 5 years?" He asked

I sat there taken aback by this question, asking myself what does he mean. My first reaction was "Yo! Bro", I said this in my head of course as I couldn't dare utter this in a formal job interview. I paused for a few seconds, asking myself many questions like what exactly are you trying to find out, we had already spoken about the possibility of working at the company for the next 5 years and my response was positive hinting I might be there for that long if there are growth opportunities, then another thought came to mind 'or was he looking for someone like him', I remember checking his LinkedIn profile after he sent me an interview invite, he was new in this company but had spent about 7 years working in the same role before joining this young company.

I had to snap myself back to reality and give a response as the silence was becoming awkward, so like a diplomat that I'm often called I replied "I think a good thing about doing the same thing for a long time is that you become an expert and can teach others how to do that thing, this is something I'd love to do but I'm also sure I'd find a way to interact with other departments to get to know what they are doing." A mild way of saying I don't think so but I think it's a good idea.

I believe specialists are very important because they help us make advances in different fields and make ground breaking discoveries. However, they are more prone to the

Einstellung effect, a psychology term for the tendency of problem solvers to employ only familiar methods even if better ones are available.

As Pedro Domingos, a computer science professor and machine learning researcher, quipped “Knowledge is a double-edged sword. It allows you to do some things, but it also makes you blind to other things that you could do.”²

Lessons from the Renaissance Period

The word Renaissance is derived from the French word that means ‘rebirth’, marking a period of European cultural, artistic, political and economic “rebirth”, a period when the likes of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci defied the norms and expanded the boundaries of what’s possible in art and science. But what does this have to do with management - people and companies?

The father of Evolution Charles Darwin already answered that when he said, “It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.” In an ever evolving world, it’s only ideal that we continually adjust to change, like the mythological phoenix great people and companies need to experience rebirth from time to time to thrive. I believe Peter Drucker was advocating for the renaissance mindset when he said, Knowledge has to be improved, challenged and increased constantly, or it vanishes.

What the renaissance period revealed is that the world worked better when few people decided to see art and science as complementary rather than exclusive. And while it appears that being a renaissance person is more of an innate trait, I think it can be developed. To me a renaissance person or manager is someone who embraces inputs from different fields to make better decisions and deliver better results.

Creating an environment where people can do their best work

Taking a leaf from Peter Drucker’s endless wisdom, the functions of a manager is to set objectives, organize, motivate and communicate, measure performance and develop people.³ To me this can be summed up as creating an environment where people can do their best work. Now let’s look at how the spirit of renaissance can help us create a better environment for people and companies to do their do their best work.

Trying different things and perspectives

The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic. Peter Drucker

We often grow up asking a lot of questions, questioning life. However overtime, training and society makes us streamline our interests to conform to the norm. But not everyone turns out this way, one of such persons is Richard Branson whose headmaster at Stowe, famously predicted that by twenty-one he would either be in Jail or be a millionaire. Richard Branson's mum shares an important parenting advice in a letter she wrote to him. ⁴

“On a few such occasions we would say things like, ‘Oh don’t be ridiculous, Ricky! That’s never going to work.’ More often than not, however, your father and I instead opted to give you plenty of scope to learn by your mistakes and so left you to get on with your Christmas tree growing, bird breeding and all the other weird and wonderful enterprises you came up with...Almost without exception they all ended in some form of a disaster with us picking up the pieces-literally and metaphorically - but we soldier on and just kept hoping that one day the lessons learned would help you in life. And that certainly would seem to have turned out to be the case.

After a rocky beginning, Once you and Virgin had become an established success, Ted and I would often ponder on just how differently you might have turned out had we been more controlling, or some might say ‘better,’ parents. What if we had insisted that you not take so many silly risks?”

Ricky turned out to be a business magnate because he was allowed to roam and try out things that interested him. Neil Blumenthal, the CEO of Warby Parker the innovative company that transformed the eyewear industry, said creativity flows when curiosity is stoked.

The renaissance spirit also teaches us that the solutions to the world's problems might not be solved by experts. In companies, traditionally, tough problems have been solved by experts, so we tend to look to the top technical executives to organize teams of scientists and engineers to tackle current problems. But in a world of ubiquitously connected people and ideas, this approach may be backwards. Big innovation most often happens when an outsider who may be far away from the surface of the problem reframes the problem in a way that unlocks the solution. ⁵

Free flow of Ideas

When we hear the word communication it's easy to start thinking of what we'd tell people but drucker says, “The leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask.”

In *What Makes an Effective Executive*, drucker says it even clearer, “Take responsibility for communicating, seek input from superiors, subordinates and peers on your actions”

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What we learn from renaissance is that we must build organisations where people can communicate clearly and freely.

Earlier this year, Boeing ran into trouble when it’s best selling 737 max jet crashed twice within the space of five months. This brought scrutiny into the practices of the aircraft manufacturer and it wasn’t long before there appeared to be evidence that workers in the troubled Boeing 787 dreamliner plant in South Carolina were pushed to maintain an overly ambitious production schedule and fearful of losing their jobs if they raised concerns.⁷

It’s simple human nature. We don’t want to ruffle feathers. We don’t want to be the first one to tell. We don’t want to be thought of as stupid or over reaching when we say: “I just don’t see how this is going to work or something could be wrong” We don’t want a dressing down when we point out a quality problem.⁸ But not speaking up could mean the loss of a whole lot more, as a concerned shareholder of Boeing lamented “We don’t have to have 300-plus people die every time to find out that something is unreliable.”⁹

We’re focusing on the wrong thing if all we do is champion courage without breaking it down to its fundamentals and ask, are people comfortable speaking their minds, do people fear being punished for standing up against authority, especially when they feel authority is going wrong.

In the words of Karim Lakhani, “We hire people for their knowledge and curiosity, but then we don’t let them apply their intelligence fully. Instead, we tell them what to do. We don’t think that their talents could potentially apply in other settings.”⁵

If companies really want to innovate and succeed, they need to radically flip their thinking regarding innovation processes and who is able to contribute on what. Companies can start by simply making all the problems transparent, visible, and accessible.

An environment where people can do their best work is one in which anybody anywhere can have a look at the problem and participate in solving it.

Silos are for grains

If humans can go to great lengths to try out or believe things that work or seem to work, then why are we ignoring the apparent value in embracing arts and science? If everyone acknowledges that great progress is made at the intersection of different fields, why do we prefer to reside in silos?

In a world made up of ecosystems, everyone is invited.

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