

Look for Lapis Lazuli: Our Futures As Renaissance Managers Depends On It

“Everything connects to everything else.” - Leonardo da Vinci

Several years ago, my business partner and I wrote a children’s book series. The protagonist of the series is a seven-year-old girl who learns the science and magic of business which she then teaches to her friends through her own micro-entrepreneurial ventures. In one of the books, the ferociously curious young, female entrepreneur discovers a new passion - art. She falls in love with the subject when her teacher introduces her to the work of Leonardo da Vinci.

More specifically, she falls in love with one of da Vinci’s go-to paint colors - lapis lazuli.

She loves the bold, bright marine blue pigment which dates back to Egyptian and Babylonian days and which many art scholars have referred to as magic. She spies hints of it in his Mona Lisa. Then, she starts to see the color in her own life. And *then* - she sees opportunities to use the blue pigment in her own work. They’re moments of discovery that lead to a renaissance of ideas for a young, albeit fictional, girl.

The idea to use the lapis lazuli color in our children’s book series was my business partner’s idea. A restaurateur who constantly craves new design inspiration, she read about da Vinci and his use of lapis lazuli. Then, she told me about it. There we were - two 20-and-30-somethings studying da Vinci and lapis lazuli late night - and engineering both the artist and his paint into an unlikely place - a children’s book about business.

The funny thing though is this - the more I started to read about the classic pigment, the more I started to see it in and around my modern life. It was everywhere; from street art graffiti, to paintings secured behind velvet rope, to the science of a logo design, to subway tile behind the bar where everyone gushed about the craft cocktails. Once I knew it, I saw it *everywhere*. It was like seeing the world through a new set of lenses.

Training my eye to spot the lapis lazuli sparked a renaissance in me.

It reminded me that there are these thorough lines in life. And one of life’s greatest privileges is finding them. That is Leonardo da Vinci’s legacy.

A good number of artists during da Vinci’s era used lapis lazuli. Cennino Cennini called the pigment “a noble color, beautiful, the most perfect of all colors,” in “Book of the Arts”

around 1400.¹ Johannes Vermeer used it in his 1665 painting, “The Girl with a Pearl Earring”.²

But this isn't about the paint itself; It's about seeing the paint across life. And then, it's about doing what da Vinci did best: finding that balance between doing the deep work and seeing the bigger picture - *all at the same time*.

Peter Drucker said it brilliantly in *The Practice of Management* when he referred to the role of the manager, “He must, so to speak, keep his nose to the grindstone while lifting his eyes to the hills - which is quite an acrobatic feat.”³

It truly is an acrobatic feat that starts with learning how to spot the lapis lazuli. Our futures as Renaissance managers depends on it.

And here's how we're going to do it.

We must learn how to make these connections for ourselves; and then - we must teach the next generation to make these connections.

It must start with us. Each of us respectively. We must learn how to make these connections for ourselves.

When I say ‘make these connections,’ I refer to that precise, aha! moment we see something - an idea, a person, concept - that brings us into direct and personal contact and connects us with another idea, person, concept. It's the moment you read Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and realize you can use the experience of taking customers to another world in an ad campaign. Or the fact we can connect science and business by using the ancient word ‘anatomy’ to describe the living, breathing nature of business plans. Or when you see the architecture of a building and know you can use the same slope in a logo design. It's what great about the science and art of hip hop music, poetry, Legos, the social sciences, the physics of skateboarding, *New Yorker* cartoons. It's creativity, yes; but it's even more so, connection. Or even - a pattern. And it's special. Because it's the moment a straightforward, one-dimensional idea turns

¹ Morris, Roderick Conway. “Lapis Lazuli and the History of ‘the Most Perfect’ Color.” *The New York Times*. 18 August 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/arts/international/lapis-lazuli-and-the-history-of-the-most-perfect-color.html>

² Meier, Allison. “Lapis Lazuli: A Blue More Precious than Gold.” *Hyperallergic*. 5 August 2016.

<https://hyperallergic.com/315564/lapis-lazuli-a-blue-more-precious-than-gold/>

³ Drucker, Peter F. *The Practice of Management*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers. 1954. p 342.

three-dimensional. It's learning to seek and find these connections is the difference between seeing a square and a cube.

Learning how we make these connections is a personal process. Drucker would call it a unique brand of self-knowledge. It's learning how to put down our smartphones, take a deep breath, and take a look around to seek connections; to open gateways to ideas.

No one did that better than Leonardo da Vinci. A true polymath, he ferociously pursued knowledge and learning in a variety of seemingly unrelated subjects ranging from art and science. His personal magic was connecting them.

“For Leonardo the precepts of science - observation, hypothesis, and experiment - were critical to art. He moved fluidly between the two realms, grasping lessons from one to inform the other,’ says Francesca Fiorani, associate dean for the arts and humanities at the University of Virginia.”⁴

This process matters because it's how we start to see the world differently. It's also how we see potential differently. We ask 'what if' more. We wonder 'what would be possible when' more. We process opportunity differently.

That doesn't just happen. It's a conscious choice on each of our parts. As Clayton Christensen (and team) notes in *The Prosperity Paradox*, “There are so many opportunities ready to be mined. But to see the opportunity, we will have to put on new lenses.”⁵

We need to put on new lenses - and then teach the next generation how to put on theirs. We need to show - not tell - them how to make these connections. That means getting to know them, listen to them, respect how they learn. Then, walking, talking, and explaining our processes *with* them. This can't be a virtual process; it must be in-person, one-on-one, real-time. We must take the time to tell a young person the connection we make, when we see it, how we got to that point, and why it matters. Drucker would challenge us to do this consistently and confidently. A lot depends on it - most especially the future of our businesses and their respective values. As Drucker notes in “They're Not Employees, They're People”: “Even if these people are not

⁴ Kalb, Claudia. “Why Leonardo da Vinci's brilliance endures; 500 years after his death.” National Geographic. May 2019.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2019/05/leonardo-da-vinci-artistic-brilliance-endures-500-years-after-death/>

⁵ Christensen, Clayton M., and Efosa Ojomo and Karen Dillon. *The Prosperity Paradox*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.

traditional - read, legal - employees, they are still a capital resource for the organization and critical to its business performance.”⁶

Which is why the great debate for the future of business shouldn't be a conversation about generalists or specialists. It should be about igniting the polymath in each of us and inspiring the next generation to see the dots - and connect them. To find the middle paths. Because our future depends on our ability to create and teach to experiences that transcend any one subject - science and math and art and music - but bring them all together with one through line.

In *The Practice of Management*, Drucker recounts a quote from Bismarck, who says: “It's easy to find a Minister of Education; all the job needs is a long white beard; But a good cook is different; that requires universal genius.”⁷

21st century universal *genius* will be about finding the connections and igniting our imaginations. 21st century *empowerment* will be leading as Renaissance managers who teach the next generation how, when, and why to see connections for themselves. Because when we ignite their imaginations, so much more becomes possible.

Once we're there, we need ecosystems of perspective to support them.

Ignite our ecosystems of perspective.

In the early half of the 20th century, botanist Arthur Tansley started to use the word ecosystem to describe “a community of organisms interacting with each other and their environments.”⁸ Though he was referring to the biology of it all - the air, water, and earth - the business community latched onto the phrase by the end of the century. We used the word to explain how we compete, collaborate, communicate, and create *with* and *for* each other.

Today, ecosystems of business refer to networks of organizations - suppliers, vendors, partners - involved in making a product happen. And they work. They streamline relationships, ideas, and processes. They produce *things*.

But how do we go about creating the space to produce *connections* that move us forward?

⁶ Drucker, Peter F. “They're Not Employees, They're People.” *Harvard Business Review*. February 2002. (Reprinted in The Peter F. Drucker Reader published by Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation. 2017.) p 87.

⁷ Drucker, Peter F. *The Practice of Management*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers. 1954. p 341.

⁸ Hayes, Adam. “Business Ecosystem.” *Investopedia*. June 2019 (updated).
<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/business-ecosystem.asp>

By igniting our ecosystems of perspective.

The truth of the matter is this: ecosystems have shaped cultural experiences and revolutions far before we gave them that name. They've been round tables, tribes, bands, congregations, pilgrims, colonies, expeditions of explorers.

They're *communities*.

Because ecosystems are how people come together to change the dynamics of knowledge and to change our relationships with ideas.

What feels so mighty about the Renaissance was that it was such a critical time in how ecosystems of perspective emerged and how the dynamics of knowledge shifted. For da Vinci, an ecosystem of perspective started in the art studio, or the workshop. As a student of Verrocchio, a prominent painter and sculptor in Florence, Leonardo served early on as an apprentice for seven years.⁹ He served alongside other apprentices - now famous - including Ghirlandaio, Perugino, Botticelli, and Lorenzo di Credi. He was exposed to a wide range of theory and technical skills.¹⁰ Both science and art. There was instruction and collaboration; and I can imagine a constant buzz about ideas, innovation, and possibility.

Art studios and workshops became ways to train and exchange ideas and talents.

Ecosystems of perspective are more than just teams, boards of advisors or mentors. And they're not as simple as bringing together a room of different specialists to share their speciality.

These ecosystems of perspective are collaborative forces where every voice at the table matters - and teaches everyone else something new. When different perspectives come together to compete, collaborate, communicate, and create *with* and *for* each other, magic happens. Because they elevate how we understand, interpret, and make meaning from connections.

It's why we came to fall in love with ecosystems of perspective like the Algonquin Round Tables in Midtown Manhattan or the Getrude Stein salons at 27 rue de Fleurus on the Left Bank. It's easy to learn how to spot lapis lazuli when there's a Picasso at the table.

⁹ "Leonardo da Vinci." *Wikipedia*. Original source: Bacci, Mina. *The Great Artists: Da Vinci*. Translated by Tanguy, J. New York: Funk & Wagnalls. 1963, updated 1978.

¹⁰ "Leonardo da Vinci." *Wikipedia*. Original source: Bortolon, Liana. *The Life and Times of Leonardo*. London: Paul Hamlyn. 1967.

Changing the dynamics of knowledge is two-fold: We change not only how we each show up at the table; we also invite more voices to the table which, in turn, builds communities of perspective and insight - but also creativity and innovation.

In that sense, we also then re-evaluate the idea of work; work suddenly becomes more about *thinking first*. I think if you posed the question 'What is work?' to da Vinci, he would most certainly start with *thinking*. As knowledge workers, we need to return to a place where we are quick to note thinking as a top priority of our work. And ecosystems of perspective foster that.

What's even better is that these special ecosystems are even more powerful when they represent generations of perspective. When the voices represent a different time and space. It's why we study da Vinci and Drucker. Very rarely does next-level knowledge and value come from one dimension of perspective. Drucker confirmed that. "This is doubly important because the changes that affect a body of knowledge most profoundly do not, as a rule, come out of its own domain."¹¹

So, what's possible with ecosystems of perspective? We change our relationship with and for ourselves. And we make Renaissances within each of our lives even more possible.

We must manage and own the Renaissances in our respective lives.

As the penultimate cultural revolution, the Renaissance was a time of "rebirth" and rediscovery of classical perspective, art, and humanity after dark Middle Ages. Writers, thinkers, and artists thrived in the Renaissance; explorers craved new places and new cultures; scientists challenged assumptions to reinvent and invent.

What bridged the gap between the dark ages and the Renaissance was humanism - the idea to celebrate human achievement, value, and possibility.

Almost five hundred years later, 21st century thinkers talk a lot about transformation - the pursuit of personal and professional transformations. They're noble efforts to get people from the 1.0 versions of themselves to the 2.0 versions.

As much as we need the world 2.0 versions of thinkers, we need something deeper.

¹¹ Drucker, Peter F. "The New Society of Organizations." *Harvard Business Review*. September-October 1992. (Reprinted in *The Peter F. Drucker Reader* published by Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation. 2017.) p 122.

We need people willing and eager to pursue personal renaissances.

What's the difference? A transformation is a change in shape or appearance. A renaissance is a rebirth.

The idea of personal renaissances isn't a new concept; what's new is how we each take it on for *ourselves*. They're practices in deep self-awareness to refine your inner voice.

We must pursue, manage, and downright *own* our *own* Renaissances - relentless personal pursuits to rediscover art, humanity, and perspective; ideas, insight, and innovation; writers, thinkers, and artists.

When we make the choice to observe the world around us, to study new subjects, to rediscover science, to learn just a little bit more about how someone thinks or paints or creates, we see the world through new lenses.

Da Vinci understood this. With over 13,000 pages of daily notes and drawings that drew connections between art and what would be modern science, there is no doubt that da Vinci was on a constant search that explored knowledge, imagination, and possibility.

We each have that same potential to be the polymath he was. We never give ourselves the chance to get there though. We're distracted. We're busy. We're buried in our smartphones. We have far too many excuses that get us off the hook from pushing and challenging ourselves.

Renaissances in our own lives are about managing ourselves, as Drucker would note; but even more so, they're about managing our potential. There's poetry and soul to it, no doubt; a deeper and wider appreciation for art and culture and learning so we can see and make more connections.

But it's also about learning how we want to use our time, energy, and attention as well as learning what and how effective we can each respectively be.

The goal of a personal renaissance is two-fold; first, pursue self-knowledge to refine our inner voices; but, more so, to get to a place within the soul that Drucker speaks of often. The goal is now to ask ourselves the question: *What can I contribute?*

It's a critical question because it challenges us to evaluate and redesign not only how we contribute, but also how we commit. Because, as Drucker notes in *The Practice of Management*, "[to] ask, 'What can I contribute?' is to look for the unused potential in the job."¹²

Finding the unused potential and making the commitment to do something about it pulses in the heart of every renaissance, rebirth, revolution. It's fresh optimism we need now more than ever. That level of optimism has the potential to inspire new innovations, processes, and markets.

These renaissances and this optimism have layers of impact. Not only does it impact the person who is taking it on, but it also inspires and empowers others - employees, team members, collaborators, partners, competitors. Because, as a true Drucker experience, our renaissances are also about empowering others.

Cultural revolutions happen when we see connections. We get to that place in life as Renaissance managers when we've experienced a revolution - a renaissance - of our own.

CONCLUSION

When we wrote the children's book series we, too, wanted to spark a bit of a cultural revolution. We wanted to challenge the assumption that kids were too young to learn business; we wanted to see what would be possible for the future if we taught developing minds about entrepreneurship. We wanted to fuse together strategy and math, curiosity and imagination, business, entrepreneurship, and the joy of childhood. And we wanted to take action together. Because, as retired American soccer player, Abby Wambach said in her book *Wolfpack*, "revolutions are won with collective action."

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As much as learning to see connections - to spot the lapis lazuli - is a personal journey, it's the collective action and collective commitment, to this approach that will shift not only business, but also - and more importantly - relationships. We also develop different and broader visions of ourselves.

¹² Drucker, Peter F. *The Practice of Management*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers. 1954. p 54.

¹³ Wambach, Abby. *Wolfpack*. New York: Celadon Books. 2019. p 59.

As Drucker notes, “unless he makes special efforts to gain direct access to outside reality, he will become increasingly inside-focused.”¹⁴ (15) An inward focus allows us to grind out the hard work. But, in doing so, we miss the bigger picture. We miss the connections that unearth possibility.

There’s no doubt that the humanities - art and science and philosophy - are natural gateways to heightened experiences. They take our imaginations, hearts, and souls to new places. But really, it’s the ability to be head down in the work, and yet see the humanities in hidden corners of the world that should be the true heightened experience we seek every, single day.

So, now - go find a painting with lapis lazuli. Then, look around; explore; enjoy the new lenses. You’ll see the marine blue pigment now. And when you do, show and tell someone else about it.

The future depends on it.

Word count: 2,891 (including title and quote)

¹⁴ Drucker, Peter F. *The Effective Executive*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. 1966, 1967. p 15.