



*"You can no longer manage a workforce. You manage individuals" - Peter Drucker*



*Natural Harmony – Juan Pablo Benavides – 1/1/2021*



## **My notes about crisis, leadership, and coffee**

Being the son of a coffee leader entails many commitments with a legacy that haunts me, and I proudly accept. The challenge is to learn about this product that has a significant economic and cultural impact on society, and is harvested bean by bean in the hillsides of Southern Colombia, eventually valued in the stock market, and has the potential to end up in the best hotels, boutiques, and enjoy by people all over the world. Furthermore, where I come from, coffee is the economic engine of many families and brings hope to a country facing difficult times.

### **Crisis happens all the time**

*"The concept indicates uncertainty, misfortune, and trial, and refers to an uncertain future, whose conditions cannot be sufficiently elucidated" (Kosleck, 2002: 236)*

The evolution of any person is connected to daily changes that must be solved from their experience and learning. The human being must make decisions day by day: what to do, when to do it, where to do it, and even in the long term, what each person wants to become in the future. Each person carries his or her own destiny.

The year 2020 came with abrupt changes and crises in the new social, economic, political, and even cultural organization chart, affecting companies worldwide regardless of their size, function, and impact on society. An uncertain future is why every people, company, and nation will find itself in crisis at some point in time; moreover, the same history allows the idea that problems always appear, no matter how much effort the human being tries to avoid them. In the last 150 years, the world has experienced fourteen recessions, according to the World Bank; during the previous thirty years, more than thirty new or emerging



infectious diseases of diverse etiology have emerged with a high impact on both human and animal health (Jiménez, 2013) ; and countless war conflicts throughout the history of humanity causing significant change at the national, regional and even global levels.

*"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." - Charles Darwin.*

Industries and companies around the world endure the same situation. Only those who are able to adapt to crisis and undertake the transformation of the new world demands will stand a chance. Nevertheless, in some cases, a change not always co-occurs with bad times. For example, domestic consumption in Colombia increased significantly in the coffee case, near 15% in 2020 (Semana, 2020). Moreover, it is expected that this will drive the economic reopening for the country, being one of the products that will serve as a bridge to move monetary capital from the rich countries to those not so prosperous economically, but with the most significant number of natural resources.

### **Listening is the key to decision making**

Leaders are those who carry the weight of the decisions and paths to follow, and their aptitudes and attitudes in decision-making mark significant changes. Nonetheless, leaders do not always provide ideas and solutions; they often only make decisions and implement them. Thus, listening to peers, staff, stakeholders is vital and even more critical in determining who to listen to and what to pay attention to.

Once a while ago, my father told me a story. In 2015 there was a discussion about the new technologies when collecting coffee beans, one of the aforementioned empty discourses; among the great economists and business people working in the sector of



marketing, buying, and selling coffee questioned why not replace the workers who collect the beans with more efficient machines. Immediately two questions came to light; the first was a social and moral question. With the implementation of such a program, many people would lose their jobs. The second was of a technical and technological nature related to the type of machine adapted to the terrain and characteristics of Colombian coffee growing. Without taking into account the first aspect; the implementation of a device capable of adapting to these territories would be like a battle between David and Goliath- with the significant difference that in this case - Goliath would be the winner since he would not be represented by any worker, professor or much less by a new harvesting practice; he would be the winner since no machine has been able to efficiently adapt to the power of nature despite a great variety of attempts. The challenging work involved harvesting coffee beans, steep, muddy slopes, intense heat and rain, stones, the bean selection process, and limited space due to branches and leaves that cross the narrow furrows, among other factors; those are just some of the reasons why a new coffee harvesting machine has not adapted successfully, and some of the reasons why using new technologies in this field have been affected. However, if new methods emerge, social and cultural factors will be another challenge in implementing them. Several of the workers who pick the beans are unwilling to change their ways unless someone teaches them how to apply new practices. Therefore, reiterating the context and knowing the conditions of those behinds is the basis of this great industry, so when it comes to implementing policies and new practices that promote development, they can become realities and not failed project ideas.

A leader needs to understand numbers, graphs, and market predictions. But also the human factor, understanding people, their context, their needs, and desires are vital for a



good performance. Drucker mentioned in the following way... *"In other words, they must learn to speak English instead of putting formulas on the blackboard. They must learn to listen to somebody who does not know what a regression analysis is". - Peter Drucker.*

I remember, throughout my youth, accompanying my father when teaching and listening to people about the work of a good coffee farmer. Sometimes, it was difficult to explain the most appropriate form and practices that would improve their harvest ecologically and economically. Nevertheless, the techniques that would really impact their lives were overshadowed by those technical speeches that sounded great and somehow impossible. When I listened to the speeches of certain representatives - who did not really know how to listen to the people - they only delivered a rather politicized and utopian discourse about what would be the best for the times to come: they visualized projects, infrastructure, subsidies, and even education for the people who believed in them; but when it was time to start, like a magic trick the same people who promised it or the resources for the projects disappeared like it never happened. A good leader must offer more than dreams; a leader must materialize future realities based on facts. Otherwise, the leader might not be followed, or simply the individual lacks the character of a leader.

### **Young minds**

Young generations are constantly bombarded about what they will do when the older and wiser ones are gone; some of the comments are pessimistic and others optimistic; however, the new generations living in a digital era will have to do as stated when a crisis arises as always: detect the problem, read the context and through aptitudes and attitudes, provide a solution that, unlike previous generations, the new generations have a technological advance, a phenomenon of globalization that increasingly allows a broader



global impact and all the imagination and ideas that a young mind is willing to provide in these times.

Because of this crisis, great entrepreneurship in the sector of coffee appeared that in an era before the pandemic would not have been possible. Marketing campaigns boosted by the increase in time spent on social networks boosted online sales and allowed small ventures to grow; nevertheless, it is very challenging to understand that consumption trends are different and are focused on consumption in homes. Therefore, new coffee companies should foster this trend, leading and developing initiatives that seek to innovate consumer experiences through creativity and new ideas (Caldas, Comité de cafeteros de Colombia, 2020).

### **Possibility to dream**

Drucker knew well that few things are as sure to happen as change and that change do not only co-occur with crises; the changes are necessary to create opportunities, to improve, to offer a better service, to implement new practices and technologies, to increase profits, to enhance the life of workers, to start over, to get rid of a bad habit, to forgive, to test and innovate, to evolve...

The crises are necessary to change, reflect, and rethink new working models; the change can be scary, the bubble of comfort called tradition establishes only a place where people lose nothing but at the same time gain nothing. The leaders of tomorrow must be willing to face the new changes not only as managers or heads of important companies wearing tuxedos, but also as a coach, a colleague, and a friend who works in



cooperation with their workers for the common good and meet realistic goals without leaving aside the possibility to dream.



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