

The Life-Changing Magic of Writing an Essay on Peter Drucker

“Your first and foremost job as a leader is to take charge of your own energy and then help to orchestrate the energy of those around you”

Peter Drucker

I wish I could say that I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately and to front only the essential facts of life.¹ Alas, my exile was neither noble nor deliberate. It was courtesy of COVID.

In March I was enrolled in a program in Spain and made it to my home country just before the borders closed. As I came home, I became sick. Health care system in my country wasn't yet prepared for the virus, and there were no tests. I can only hazard a conjecture that the sickness I had was COVID.

I self-isolated for weeks and would have found it a true Walden-inspired adventure, if my business didn't have to deal with symptoms that scared me way more than my fever.

As I write this in retrospective I find it difficult to separate reality from fears. I was surrounded by the fog of cloudy future predictions, Facebook feed buzzing, panic spreading, dollar rising. Like many of my compatriots, I was far more preoccupied with the dollar exchange rate than the dangers of the virus. Several years ago dollar grew 2 times during one day, killing many small businesses with one shot. In economies with less developed investment ecosystems and very high bank interest rates businesses are dependent on attracting investment from angels (which are almost as rare as real angels, so finding them is considered to be more due to serendipity than to the potential of your business idea). Peer-to-peer investment is also very popular, as people do not trust banks yet look for means of increasing their capital.

Investor behavior is extremely tangible to dollar exchange rate and future expectations. As COVID started, a full can of black paint seemed to shed on the future.

My small business is also dependent on dollar exchange rate. When I type “a small business”, it doesn't quite convey the size my obligations have in my head. And with closed borders I didn't even have a Plan B of hiding somewhere in the remote jungle.

During the past year we have been preparing the launch of our new product. It was scheduled to happen in spring – right when COVID hit. As we put the launch on hold, we faced the necessity to take tough decisions concerning our existing product. It was the very beginning of the pandemic. Government didn't introduce the isolation yet. There were no clear guidelines on safety of staff and deliveries. So it was possible to keep delivering to our b2b clients – yet we felt that this could endanger both our workers and clients.

My business partner and I were desperately trying to motivate the team – and surely were the least motivated people ourselves.

¹ Henry David Thoreau “Walden” (1854)

I tried my best to cope with the crisis in a smart way. I wrote down worst case scenarios. I came up with plans. I looked for new ways of creating value. I read so many materials on business in times of COVID.

One day I felt that I lost the ground. I was overwhelmed by the sea of possible hazards and opportunities. Like Odysseus, I was torn between Scylla and Charybdis – and simultaneously tempted by voices of sirens-turned-business-consultants.

I was fussing. Who needs 10 possible actions, if you don't feel confident about any of them? As days passed and the business world seemed to freeze, my anxiety started crumbling. This was when I started having panic attacks. I read omnivorously, doing myself more harm than good. Thoughts were falling apart – and so was my work.

My anxious mind would collaborate with my stress hormones and wake me at 4 a.m. every day. I wanted to keep it busy with some reading exercise – yet I was cautious about overwhelming it. So I picked several books and decided that this will be it. Instead of constantly monitoring the Fresh New Remedy Article – I would read slowly and attentively and contemplate on my reading.

The three books I chose were “On Managing Myself” by Peter Drucker, “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up” by Marie Kondo, and a book on Greek mythology.

The choice was dictated by the urgent needs. I badly needed managing myself (and the book was so small it could fit in the palm of my hand, so I was naively hopeful that in just one day I will receive my black belt in self-management). I expected that Greek heroes, constantly thrown into funnels of problems by unreliable Greek gods, would bring me comfort and support during uncertain times. And speaking of tidying up (a truly vital skill during isolation) – I always felt that practicing new arts is the fastest way to pull yourself together. I decided that in the absence of fun activities tidying will do – it surely could be practiced immediately.

As I read “On Managing Myself”, I felt that seemingly simple advice had an interesting calming effect on my mind. My thoughts became saner and sober – and I noticed a spark of tongue-in-cheek humor that wasn't stifled even as I got to my work tasks.

I thought that writing this essay would serve as a “practice” of Drucker wisdom. Writing reminded me of catching the very essence of knowledge and weaving it into my own words and experiences, mastering it and making it forever mine.

I kept getting up very early, so I had several hours of reading and writing before starting to work. For weeks I did this exercise with steadfast fidelity, trying to link Drucker words with my own life.

The process of choosing the works to read was similar to decision making in business. I was overwhelmed by the volume of Drucker legacy. I mean, Harvard Business Review's website kindly offered me 751 results on “Drucker”, let alone the books. My whole life seemed not enough to read everything by Drucker. He must have written faster than I read.

I felt the need to set limits and to choose the books and articles that I find critical (i.e. indispensable, vital, crucial, according to one of the meanings of the words “critical” in Merriam

Webster Dictionary). It was an arduous task and I spent the entire day carefully choosing my sources. I set a deadline – selection process had to be closed by evening.

I cannot express how relieved I felt that evening. I lived through the anxious feeling that other articles and books may be more useful. I accepted the fact that I don't have the expertise in pre-evaluating the books and I may waste my time and effort. Basically, I let myself the possibility of doing a mistake on a micro-level of choosing my reading. Yet I knew that being decisive would shut the door in my mind and my thoughts would flow in one direction instead of buzzing around the "what if" sign.

Needless to say that this discovery had an immediate effect on my thoughts about myself as a business owner and a manager. It brought humility and acceptance of my limits. I can't even choose the books. How can I have guarantees of the future outcomes of my decisions?

The skill of shutting out the non-essential is one of the most valuable skills of our time. It is critical thinking in a nutshell. Deciding where we don't go and what we don't do as a business is even more important than coming up with ideas of what we should do.

It is a first skill a manager should turn to in hard times, because if he or she fails to do so, energy will be spilled, and strength needed for future action will be lost. While Drucker stressed that a person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weakness.

Leaders lead. They navigate through waves of competing priorities, through noise and chaos. They may have limited provisions (i.e. resources). They may have unreliable maps (i.e. data). And they always find themselves in unknown waters, trying to make their way in between Scylla and Charybdis. If they let go of the wheel – they will experience how the current catches them and drives onto the rocks. Drucker described these underwater management traps and warned that as companies do one small sin after another it gets impossible to stop. Destructive habits always develop quickly and easily and cause domino effect.

The only reliable helper is the guiding star – your own criteria. "If the executive lets the flow of events determine what he does, what he works on, and what he takes seriously, he will fritter himself away "operating." He may be an excellent man. But he is certain to waste his knowledge and ability and to throw away what little effectiveness he might have achieved. What the executive needs are criteria which enable him to work on the truly important, that is, on contributions and results, even though the criteria are not found in the flow of events".²

Criteria are vital for both people and companies. "The mission of the organization has to be clear enough and big enough to provide common vision. The goals that embody it have to be clear, public, and constantly reaffirmed. Management's first job is to think through, set, and exemplify those objectives, values, and goals"³ – i.e., managers are in charge of criteria.

Setting limits is critical in various spheres of human life. Through setting limits, we make sure that our thoughts and energy follow one track instead of flowing everywhere and weakening us. We maintain a sane mind. Ancient Greeks used the image of fire burning inside the vessel as a

² Peter Drucker "The Effective Executive" (1966)

³ Peter Drucker "The Effective Executive" (1966)

perfect embodiment of a self-management. Vessel stands for limits we set for ourselves. Fire stands for action we take. Flame fills the vessel and brings sense to life – yet without the protection of vessel it will either go out from the rain and wind, or cause a fire.

When mastering a new skill – for example, giving yourself a promise to live a healthier lifestyle - it is very important to limit the sources you get information from and introduce new habits gradually. Otherwise instead of having a constant wheel-like model of “data-plan-practice-analysis”, we will find ourselves torn between a multitude of health experts. We will run from one to another without actually doing something. Sometimes the problem isn’t only the unreliability of sources. It’s the overwhelming amount of them.

My grandmother was surely well aware of the human quality to let attention flow down the drain. She advised me to never look up ex girlfriends of my boyfriend. Indeed, it is way easier to refrain from doing it than to stop yourself from investigating his/her life for hours in a row. The same rule works for studying your business competitors – you should stop as soon as you feel that you are weakening yourself instead of getting informed.

When you do limit yourself, you will be rewarded. Creative mind loves limitations and thrives in them. As Austin Kleon writes in “Steal Like an Artist”: “All you need is a little space and a little time—a place to work, and some time to do it; a little self-imposed solitude and temporary captivity”.⁴

But what hinders our critical thinking? I believe that greed is one of the biggest enemies. It makes letting go of opportunities difficult. Maybe, it’s the greediness aspect of human desires that made Buddhism link desires to suffering? We get far too attached to possibilities – and lose the flexibility of mind.

Like a monkey that couldn’t let go of a banana, we are envious of opportunities cleverly used by others and lose the resources we possess. During the COVID crisis I found myself envying Zoom (well, who didn’t) – with no chance of becoming a competitor to Zoom. Instead of doing the best I could with what I had and where I was – I became paralyzed by fantasies.

The greed test is a very hard test (proved by Adam and Eve who really shouldn’t have focused on that apple). At some point stability of every successful company is shaken by the greed test – and the chances to fail are very high.

Drucker was mesmerized with Atlantis – a country that was ruined by greed, pride and arrogance without its citizens ever realizing it. For years Drucker had a dream of coming to Atlantis and watching its inhabitants go on with their daily lives. Who knows? Maybe Atlantis reminded of big and proud companies that hadn’t yet realized they were being drowned by their greed.

The skill of being critical lays at the heart of aforementioned Drucker’s book “The Effective Executive”. All there is to effectiveness is deciding on the first things to be done and concentrating on doing them. Effective executives are very good at getting rid of unnecessary

⁴ Austin Kleon “Steal Like an Artist” (2012)

actions – almost as good as Mari Kondo is in “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up”. They have zero tolerance to tasks that are not essential.

Maybe Drucker’s lifelong appreciation of minimalistic Japanese art wasn’t a coincidence. It was another exercise of “feeling what is right” and throwing away everything extra. By the way, this skill is easier learned in times of crisis. Instead of having constant vague anxiety, you face one very specific enemy. And like Hemingway wrote in his letters from the frontline of World War 2 – it’s so nice to fight when you know the enemy and you feel that your fight is right.

But let’s return to the arduous task of picking the Drucker books. Here is the shortlist of my finalists. “The Daily Drucker”. “Adventures of a Bystander”. “The age of discontinuity”. “Post-capitalist society”. “The Effective Executive”. “Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices”.

I read them simultaneously, letting them naturally intertwine with each other and interact with me. Soon I could look behind the quotes and feel the Drucker mindset that surpassed the words.

“Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices”⁵ was an unexpected gem, as my business is not a non-profit. Yet Drucker’s advice to “Keep your eye on the task, not on yourself. The task matters, and you are a servant” was stuck in my head. I realized that for weeks my focus was rambling everywhere but where it should be. It ventured to the future, it was stuck to my team, it stumbled upon myself (when I started pitying myself). Yet when it returned to customer, I felt peace and strength. I had evidence that my service was needed – so who was I to doubt?

As I read “Adventures of a Bystander”, I felt even more into “the Drucker mindset”.

Peter Drucker recalled catching a lifelong appreciation of craftsmanship from his teacher Miss Sophy. He learned the enjoyment of honest clean work, and respect for the task. His fingers “have never forgotten the feel of well-planed and sanded wood, cut with rather than against the grain”⁶. While I never read a separate article about Drucker linking the focused “craftsman” mindset to decision making, I passionately believe that this connection exists. Woodwork in particular demands constant decision making and sharpens your sense of proportion.

Then Drucker wrote about another teacher of his, Miss Elsa, who “had given him a work discipline and the knowledge of how one organizes for performance, though he abused this skill for years. It enabled him to do absolutely no work in the Gymnasium for eight or nine months of the year, during which he pursued my own interests, whatever they were. Then when his teachers were sure that he would at least have to repeat the year, if not be thrown out altogether, he would dust off Miss Elsa’s workbooks, set goals, and organize and he would end the year in the upper third or quarter of the class simply by doing a little work for a few weeks in a purposeful, goal-directed fashion”⁷

⁵ Peter Drucker “Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices” (1989)

⁶ Peter Drucker “Adventures of a Bystander (1978)

⁷ Peter Drucker “Adventures of a Bystander (1978)

God knows I needed this light-heartedness. I was haunted by guilt that I hadn't done enough prior to the crisis. As simple thought that it's my business and I was free to do all kinds of mistakes was unbelievably freeing and empowering. And all is not lost – I can still “dust off Miss Elsa's workbooks” and work in a purposeful, goal-directed fashion.

“Happy-go-lucky” certainly isn't the first quality you will come up with if I ask you to name a few qualities of a good manager. Yet it surely is one of the basic characteristics of a leader. You can't control the future and you have to accept the possibility of failure. To quote from Drucker, “objectives are not fate; they are direction. They are not commands; they are commitments. They do not determine the future; they are a means to mobilize resources and energies of the business for the making of the future”. Every successful business is a leap of faith. If you will pardon another Drucker quote, “Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision.”

As you let go of guarantees and master that Stoic mindset, you free space for the unexpected. According to Joseph Schumpeter, success depends on intuition, and there are no guarantees. Or, as one Italian saying puts it: “When choosing a wife (or a horse), close your eyes and pray to God”. Same rule works for businesses: alas, data isn't everything.

As I finish this essay, I do not know what is to happen to my business. Yet there are things I know for sure. Critical thinking is critical for keeping a fire burning - be it the fire of your business or the fire of your own life.