

When Management Becomes a Matter of Life or Death

Waking up in Brazil every morning has not been such an easy task, especially after reading the morning news and getting updated on yesterday's COVID-19 death toll. Usually, every day there are headlines involving scandals on the government's mismanagement that is ultimately taking thousands of lives with it. Every day I feel thankful that I'm alive, while I see people close to me dying of a disease that already has a vaccine. Never have I thought that one day management would literally be a matter of life or death.

After a year of mental sanity slowly dripping down the drain due to regularly checking the national news, I thought I would try to change things up a bit for my own sake. I started looking at what other countries were doing, especially the ones that were actually being successful in lowering contamination and death rates.

At first, I wondered if this success was due to the socio economic reality of these countries, but as it turns out, this is not the common denominator. Many developing countries are actually handling things very well, such as Vietnam, which has effectively learned a lot from its past experience with SARS in 2003 and expanded its public health expenditure, and now has one of the lowest COVID-19 death tolls. And Uruguay, even with the highest percentage of elderly people in South America and 95% of its population living in cities, still managed to limit the outbreak.¹

The opposite is also true. Take major developed countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, with leading global economies and renowned universities. Even that didn't keep them from presenting some of the world's highest COVID-19 death tolls².

While I sat on the sofa, drinking my morning coffee, I couldn't help but think there had to be something behind the failures and successes in handling this pandemic. It didn't take long for me to figure it out, I remember as if it were yesterday...

¹Maru Mormina and Ifeanyi M. Nsofor. "What developing countries can teach rich countries about how to respond to a pandemic." *The Conversation*, October 15, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/what-developing-countries-can-teach-rich-countries-about-how-to-respond-to-a-pandemic-146784>.

² "COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic," Worldometer, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

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April 28th, 2020

I was at home during quarantine. It was one of those days that I tried to stay occupied as a coping mechanism to deal with this new reality. I had just finished doing some exercises when I turned on the TV. The news was on and a reporter had asked the president about the increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases in Brazil. This was his answer:

"So what? What do you want me to do?"³

Jair Bolsonaro
(President of Brazil)

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Right there, at that very moment remembering his remark, I realised the main cause of Brazil's failure to restrain COVID-19. It was a management issue. I had no doubt about it.

Peter Drucker puts it very clearly what makes an effective executive in one of his articles as he highlights the eight practices they all master⁴. Much like an executive manages an organisation, a president manages a country. I thought that maybe Bolsonaro might not be familiar with his work, so I decided it would be prudent to write him a letter explaining how he's been quite off track, and maybe even throw in some examples of best practices to help him steer our country in the right direction. It would go something like this:

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Dear President Bolsonaro,

At this very moment that I am writing to you, Brazil records the second highest death toll in the whole world, with over 470 thousand deaths due to COVID-19, with an alarming rate of over 65 thousand new daily cases⁵ and no sight of flattening the curve. It's actually quite easy to put this in numbers, but it's a lot harder to talk about the lives of each and every one that has

³ "Covid-19 in Brazil: "So what?," The Lancet 395, no. 10235 (May 2020): 1461, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31095-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31095-3).

⁴ Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

⁵ "COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic," Worldometer, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

been taken to this disease and the heart broken families that have lost a loved one. It doesn't take much for you to imagine the feeling if you have family and friends whom you cherish.

I have noticed you are having some difficulties managing this crisis, so I thought I would write you this letter with some valuable advice, not from me, but from a worldly renowned author and management consultant named Peter Drucker. I just tried my best to piece things together to make it easier for you to implement these practices and hopefully save thousands of lives.

According to Drucker, the first thing effective executives ask themselves is "**What needs to be done?**"⁶. You can see that this strongly differs from "What do I want to do?". I will emphasize this here because even though you were elected with a strong commitment to revive our economy (what you want to do), given the current global pandemic we find ourselves in, you should actually be focusing your actions towards this health crises and curbing the spread of the virus (what you need to do). This involves setting priorities according to the urgency and importance of certain tasks and tackling those which you would be best suited to undertake and delegating the others. You may also discover that living people are important for a strong economy, and as Brazil is currently showing, the longer you postpone tackling our health crises, the more fragile our economy becomes and the more poverty prevails in our society.

Another important question to ask yourself is "**Is this the right thing for the enterprise?**"⁷, in this case you can substitute "enterprise" for "country". It's not about doing the right thing for only certain government officials or a specific social class. It's about doing the right thing for everyone in our country, our whole society. An example to illustrate this is Uruguay's president Luis Lacalle's announcement at the start of the pandemic on cuts of public officials' salaries to go to the "Coronavirus Fund" that will help pay for treatment of COVID-19 patients⁸. This happens to be the exact opposite of your actions when you raise government officials' salaries, including

⁶ Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Stephen Sefton and Ignacio Ramonet, "Uruguay: Cuts in Public Wages to Finance the 'Coronavirus Fund'," *teleSur*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Uruguay-lacalle-implements-economic-measures-facing-covid-19-20200327-0003.html>.

your own, by 69%⁹ while more than 116 million Brazilians (more than half of our population) are facing food insecurity¹⁰. This clearly shows you are not looking over the interests of the "enterprise" but that of your own.

These two practices that Drucker proposes are intimately connected and both relate to fostering a shared purpose. In order to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic it is essential to establish a common national purpose, that of minimizing harm to lives and livelihoods. According to Suze Wilson, this was a key element for the effective management of the pandemic in New Zealand led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern¹¹. Adopting this shared purpose set a clear goal for the whole country and permeated all further decisions and actions led by the government. It is no use to put several actions to work when you have no direction. Or maybe in Brazil's case, when it's heading in the wrong direction.

After you have figured out what needs to be done and if it's the right thing for our country, you must **develop an action plan**¹². Brazil is currently lacking a centralized and coordinated action plan with science-based measures to respond to Covid-19, mainly due to the politicization of the pandemic and inability of the federal government to cooperate with state and municipal authorities¹³. This is leading to highly uncentralized and uncoordinated measures which are ultimately resulting in shortages of oxygen, sedatives and even medical professionals¹⁴. The lack of planning and coordinated measures by the Health Ministry can be demonstrated by the expiration of almost 7 million COVID-19 test kits that have not been distributed¹⁵, as well as the

⁹ Bernardo Caram, "Portaria eleva salário de Bolsonaro e ministros em até 69% e estoura teto constitucional," *Valor Econômico*, May 13, 2021, <https://valor.globo.com/politica/noticia/2021/05/13/portaria-eleva-salario-de-bolsonaro-e-ministros-em-ate-69percent-e-estoura-teto-constitucional.ghtml>.

¹⁰ "Olhe para a fome," *The Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security*, accessed May 14, 2021, <http://olheparaafome.com.br>.

¹¹ Suze Wilson, "Pandemic leadership: Lessons from New Zealand's approach to COVID-19," *Leadership* 16, no. 3, (May 2020): 279-293, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020929151>.

¹² Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

¹³ Sabrina Ferigato et al, "The Brazilian Government's mistakes in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic," *The Lancet* 396, no. 10263, (November 2020): 1636, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)32164-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32164-4).

¹⁴ "Failed COVID-19 response drives Brazil to humanitarian catastrophe," *Medicins Sans Frontieres*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.msf.org/failed-coronavirus-response-drives-brazil-humanitarian-catastrophe>.

¹⁵ Euan Marshall, "Brazil reportedly has 6.8 million COVID-19 tests set to expire," *The Brazilian Report*, November 23, 2020, <https://brazilian.report/liveblog/coronavirus/2020/11/23/brazil-reportedly-has-6-8-million-covid-19-test-kits-set-to-expire/>.

Health Ministry's omission regarding several COVID-19 vaccine offers¹⁶. This is happening when Brazil is one of the countries with the highest COVID-19 cases and deaths, while also having one of the lowest testing ratios¹⁷.

Countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom are already taking up lessons from Israel's successful COVID-19 vaccination plan. As of March 15th, 50% of Israel's population had been fully vaccinated due to its centralized and rapid response in acquiring vaccine supplies and organizing a unified strategy for implementing target groups and a system to deliver this service¹⁸. It's never too late for Brazil to learn from countries that are in the forefront of combating this virus, but the longer we wait, the more lives we will lose.

When translating plans into actions, Drucker makes sure to emphasize four very important practices which I believe are suffering a serious shortage under your government. I'll briefly point them out and discuss how your government has been neglecting them. The first one is **taking responsibility for decisions**¹⁹. At this moment, Brazilians watch the disconcerting outcomes of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, where the former health minister shields you from taking responsibility for your own decision to not buy COVID-19 vaccines, even after many proofs where you publicly refused to do so through direct orders to the Health Ministry²⁰.

The next practice is **taking responsibility for communicating**²¹, this encompasses sharing your plans and asking for comments from your subordinates and even the population, and making sure everyone has the information they need to get the job done. This vital role has been seriously diverted to spreading fake news about vaccines and COVID-19 through social media and television broadcasts culminating in an anti-vaccine campaign that has led to 22% of the Brazilian

¹⁶ "Brazil ignored Pfizer's offers of COVID-19 vaccine for months last year, company says," *Global News*, May 13, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7861069/brazil-covid-pfizer/>.

¹⁷ "COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic," Worldometer, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

¹⁸ Bruce Rosen, Sarah Dine, and Nadav Davidovitch, "Lessons in COVID-19 Vaccination from Israel," *Health Affairs Blog*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20210315.476220/full/>.

¹⁹ Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

²⁰ Maria Marcello and Anthony Boadle, "Brazil's former health minister shields Bolsonaro in COVID-19 inquiry," *Reuters*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-former-health-minister-shields-bolsonaro-covid-19-inquiry-2021-05-19/>.

²¹ Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

population refusing to get vaccinated²². You have also managed to undermine the access to important COVID-19 information when you removed data on infection and death rates from the government's official channel last June²³. Wiping out critical information has been making people's jobs a lot harder on curbing the spread of the virus to solely protect your own image.

Focusing on opportunities, according to Drucker, is more important than focusing on problems²⁴. Although problems should not be set aside, opportunities should be given special attention because they are the ones that produce results. There are many examples where you have not abided by this practice, but to me the most significant one was when the Health Ministry ignored several offers from Pfizer to supply up to 70 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines²⁵. The consequences for the neglect to take advantage of this opportunity, when the whole world is in a race for vaccines, are seen by our extremely slow vaccination campaign²⁶.

Another essential practice is **making meetings productive**. Drucker outlines that executives spend more than half their time in meetings, and for them to be effective they must make them productive²⁷. In my understanding, you should have been very occupied attending various meetings to discuss plans and logistics on handling the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, given its urgency and complex nature. But when you had the chance to discuss this topic in an important ministerial meeting at the beginning of the crisis, when we already had more than 45.000 cases and almost 3.000 deaths to COVID-19, you simply did not touch upon the topic. When one of the Supreme Court judges decided to disclose the full contents of this meeting to society, topics such as the imprisonment of judges, decrees to arm society with guns, and

²² Florencia Costa and Shobhan Saxena, "Bearded Women, Crocodile Fears: Bolsonaro Injects Anxiety Into Brazil As It Waits for a Vaccine," *The Wire*, December 20, 2020, <https://thewire.in/world/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-coronavirus-vaccine-anxiety>.

²³ Jill Langlois, "Brazil once vaccinated 10 million people for polio in a day. What went wrong with COVID-19?" *National Geographic*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/brazil-once-vaccinated-10-million-people-for-polio-in-a-day-what-went-wrong-with-covid-19>.

²⁴ Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

²⁵ "Pfizer: Brazil ignored offer of COVID-19 vaccines," *La Prensa Latina Media*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.laprensalatina.com/pfizer-brazil-ignored-offer-of-covid-19-vaccines/>.

²⁶ Jill Langlois, "Brazil once vaccinated 10 million people for polio in a day. What went wrong with COVID-19?" *National Geographic*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/brazil-once-vaccinated-10-million-people-for-polio-in-a-day-what-went-wrong-with-covid-19>.

²⁷ Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

opportunism to exterminate environmental laws were revealed to be the government's sole priorities²⁸. It is unacceptable that in a time of a global health crisis your main concern during an important government meeting should not be to address it.

Last but not least, Drucker's final practice for effective executives is to **think and say "we"**. This means that you think of the needs and opportunities of the organisation before you think of your own needs and opportunities.²⁹ I can not have stressed enough through this letter how your actions are not compatible with Drucker's suggestions of best practices. I believe you should consider these points with great attention if you wish to become a leader to this country. I truly hope this letter might enlighten your governmental decision making towards a purposeful and strategic direction, one in which the lives and livelihoods of Brazilians are centerpiece.

Signed,

A Brazilian citizen

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You may be thinking, after reading this letter, why he would bother listening to me. Of course this letter isn't going to change his mind, after all he has done and not done, it's highly unlikely. But it might just prove to be a lesson for future government leaders who will need to effectively manage their countries. I believe that learning from good examples can be quite useful, but learning from bad examples can be even better. Even the worldly renowned management and leadership author Simon Sinek learned how to manage through the examples of an awful manager he once had. Simply by learning how not to manage³⁰.

Effective executives are mostly responsible for making decisions and to be able to make effective decisions, Drucker points out the importance of **classifying your problem** correctly to

²⁸ Giovanna Galvani, "Bolsonaro e ministros ignoram vítimas e casos de coronavírus em reunião ministerial," *Carta Capital*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-e-ministros-ignoraram-vitimas-e-casos-de-coronavirus-em-reuniao-ministerial/>.

²⁹ Peter F. Drucker, "What Makes an Effective Executive," *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (June 2004).

³⁰ Simon Sinek, "Simon Sinek on Learning How Not to Manage People," interview by Erik Michielsen, *Capture Your Flag*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnb2pqqeQo>.

start with³¹. The Brazilian government acted as though we had a truly exceptional problem at hand when we confirmed the first COVID-19 case at the end of February 2020³², even though China had already confirmed the first case in December 2019 and the World Health Organization had published a guide for countries to manage the outbreak only ten days later³³. It turns out our problem wasn't that unique after all, given that almost the rest of the world was already tackling the same issue. If this simple fact had been acknowledged so we could make better and more timely decisions based on others' experiences around the world, maybe thousands of lives could have been spared.

Of course management is something you can learn and develop your skills the more you practice to be better able to make effective decisions. But if your intentions and purpose are unaligned with the organization's whom you are responsible for, it's no use even trying. Bolsonaro's mismanagement of the pandemic in Brazil is not only a matter of unpreparedness and lack of management skills, it's mostly the fact that his purpose is not aligned and shared with our society. People want to live and maintain their livelihoods, but the government's actions clearly show that this is not what they are fighting for. Without a common purpose you may be making effective decisions, just not those that are in everyone's best interests.

Much like Bolsonaro's presidential campaign, the current COVID-19 crisis in Brazil is brimming with fake news. The indiscriminate use of pharmaceutical drugs with no scientific consensus for the treatment of COVID-19, as well as various conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines has been widespread due to fake news disseminated by Bolsonaro himself and his supporters³⁴. Today, the ability to make scientifically sound decisions based on facts has never been so important. This poses a major opportunity for younger generations who were born in

³¹ Peter F. Drucker, "The Effective Decision," *Harvard Business Review*, January 1967, <https://hbr.org/1967/01/the-effective-decision#>.

³² Ricardo Zorzetto, "Novo coronavírus começou a se espalhar no Brasil entre janeiro e fevereiro," *Revista Pesquisa FAPESP*, May 12, 2020, <https://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br/novo-coronavirus-comecou-a-se-espalhar-no-brasil-entre-janeiro-e-fevereiro/>.

³³ "Listings of WHO's response to COVID-19," *World Health Organization*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>

³⁴ Florencia Costa and Shobhan Saxena, "Bearded Women, Crocodile Fears: Bolsonaro Injects Anxiety Into Brazil As It Waits for a Vaccine," *The Wire*, December 20, 2020, <https://thewire.in/world/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-coronavirus-vaccine-anxiety>.

the digital era and have developed the digital literacy needed to distinguish facts from fake news, as opposed to our older counterparts who are more susceptible to this phenomena³⁵. Although seemingly trivial, today it has posed to be a crucial competency for managers and leaders to assess this pandemic in an effective manner.

Without a doubt, I would have been much happier if I could write about how my country is successfully managing the COVID-19 pandemic, how our government has put the lives and needs of our people in the forefront of its priorities and is ultimately controlling the spread of the virus and vaccinating everyone in time. But sadly, this is not the case. And I didn't want this experience of what every single brazilian is going through to be in vain. May this example of how not to manage your country, drawing on Peter Drucker's management advice, serve as a lesson for effective and science-based decision making of our future managers so as to navigate through this and other future crises we may find ourselves in.

³⁵ Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker, "Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on facebook," *Science Advances* 5, no. 1 (2019): eaau4586.