

Don't Panic: The Drucker's Guide to Manage Yourself as Human Being

By Carlotta Belviso

The Ultimate Answer

Recently a conference reminded me of an episode of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. The story goes more or less like this: a race of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings, tired of wasting time in existential questions instead of enjoying sport, built up a super computer, Deep Thought, in order to provide "the ultimate answer to Life, the Universe and Everything". For seven and an half million years the computer processes the answer while dozen of generations wait faithfully. At long last Deep Thought finally speaks:

"The ultimate answer to Life, the Universe and Everything is...42"

"42? It is that all you have got to show for 7 and a half million years' of work?"

"I checked it very thoroughly and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is "¹

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy first appeared in 1979 as a funny, eccentric parody of society but sometimes parodies unveil reality better than tons of papers. Today, while digitalization is overturning the world we live in, we are also delegating to machines the role of thinkers, in order to watch the last TV show or scroll a social network page full of perfect, fake life-shots.

It is surely essential for a balanced, happy life to enjoy the moment, loose a bit of time and simply turn-off the brain sometimes but it is also important to keep in mind that "*people grows according to the demand they make to themselves*"²: thinking is what makes us diverse and unique, if we give this responsibility to machines, we will soon be only cogs in a robotic wheel full of obscure answers. Machine can provide us with knowledge behind any expectations, but it is still our duty to make sense of it. How can we do it? How can we preserve the human face of society? Let's not panic, Peter Drucker, the father of management, offered us a guideline: we need to learn how to manage ourselves as human beings.

Managing ourselves as human beings

Management is often perceived as the heartless practice of performing at any cost in big profit-driven multi-national companies and technology as the cause of automatisa**tion**, and alienation of labour. Together they result the main responsible for the profit-at-any costs" logic that still dominates our society. This misconception can be overcome if we think behind the XX century utilitarian approach to knowledge for suggesting a new idea of management. An idea that Drucker promoted in his *Management: tasks, responsibilities, practice*. Management is not only "business management" but is "the vital organ from which the

¹ Adams, D. (1979) *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

² Drucker, P. (1967) *The Effective Executive*, New York: Harper & Row

survival of every modern institution depends”³ Good management, therefore, should not “make it difficult for people to get their work done”⁴, instead it should motivate people collaborating and contributing to a broader vision. The knowledge society we live in, offers us incredible choices, like the support of technology, but, in a world where everything is possible, choosing becomes increasingly difficult. In this scenario, rejection and elimination of alternatives are tempting, in order to find “right choice”. However as Drucker advises: “The only alternative to a society of institutions is not freedom and individual fulfilment, but totalitarianism”³. Good management can guarantee the survival of plurality and diversity among institution and between people, since what allows us to be truly free, is the co-existence of differences, i.e. the possibility of choosing.

Before managing others though, we need to learn how to manage ourselves as Drucker writes “success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves—their strengths, their values, and how they best perform”⁴. In his most inspired book, *the Adventure of a Bystander*, Peter Drucker portrays people important for him and, in doing so, it tells us much about humans’ success factors. I will focus on three episodes to exemplify three crucial aspects for remaining humans in the robot era: we just need to create, feel and remember.

Create

Drucker shows us the end of “The Infallible Institution Era” through the story of the Polany’s family i.e. the father and five children. Each of them pursues the same goal each in his own special way: “to find the alternative behind capitalism and communism (...) a new society free yet not bourgeois”⁵ just as “the Knights of the Round table looking for the Holy Grail”⁵. Even if Polany’s were brilliant and successful in the society, they all failed their mission. This failure makes their story even more significant: on one side, it proves how a society of institutions even with its downsides, can aid our freedom, on the other it shows how creativity comes from striving for an Ideal.

Creativity, as the production of something new, valuable, and timeless, is the fuel of every human action. It derives from the clash between what I have and what I want, who I am and who I want to be, how it is and how it could be. Artificial intelligence and androids are one of the extreme proofs of human creativity and came from one of our main ancestral desire: create and control life, become gods. Creativity has a double nature, since it implies a positive tension towards improvement and a negative towards destruction. It is, at one, the selfless effort to produce something that outlives you and the egoistic want to preserve your memory, it is an act of love on one side and power on the other. These sophisticated technologies raise the same contradictions but are, still, not able to create by their own. Until we are the creator, power and responsibilities remain in our hands; as the president of Future of Life Institute summarises “amplifying our human intelligence with AI has the potential of helping

³ Drucker, P. (1973) *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, New York: Harper & Row.

⁴ Drucker, P. (1999) *Managing Oneself*, Boston: Harvard Business Review

⁵ Drucker, P. (1978) *Adventures of a Bystander*, New York: Harper & Row

civilization to flourish like never before... or to self-destruct”⁶. AI systems and analytics, for example, can help farmers to maximize profits and production through fields and weather monitoring solutions⁷. At the same time, AI can provide huge benefits in healthcare providing more accurate diagnosis and machinery, aiding prevention, intervention and rehabilitation. In this way, we can use AI to fight poverty and diseases. However AI can lead also to proliferation of autonomous weapons, i.e. “intelligent systems programmed to kill”⁸ that, in the wrong hands, may cause tremendous consequences.

If we want to use intelligent systems for good, we need to manage our creativity: strive for the right ideal and convey that tension for a social benefit. The only way, as Peter Drucker teaches us, is through continuous learning⁴ updating our knowledge and goals, finding a balance between positive and negative, good and bad.

Feel

The Adventure of a Bystander shows up how balancing between two opposite not only is possible, but it is the core human skill we need to use for surviving the automation era.

When Drucker was only nine years old he met a living legend of the XIX century Vienna: Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis had a huge impact on the contemporary society but raises also many questions, which soon become myths around Freud life. Drucker shows us how these Freudian myths open up a new, broader perspective on his theory: Psychoanalysis, he writes, “is the one synthesis of the two worlds of scientific reason and non-rational inner experience. It represents a giant effort to hold together in one person the ultra-rationalist Freud, the child of the Enlightenment, and Freud the dreamer and poet of the “dark night of the soul.”⁵ What makes humans distinctive and successful, what gives meaning to our world, is the co-existence of both rational and irrational. “The world makes much less sense than we think. The coherence comes mostly from the way our minds work”⁹ writes Kahneman and he explains us how our mind works thanks to the presence and collaboration of an unconscious, fast and automatic system and a rational, slow, indirect one. Over the last decades, it seems we forgot these lessons and, as result, our society appears unbalanced toward a computational logic that sees reality only in terms of calculation and formulas. The industrial age brings distortions, like the idea of man as economical resource, the struggle for success at any costs, the assumption that profit is the only measure for value, and the rigid distinction between useful and useless in any human field. The Automation Era might set us free. “Irrationality” is not a capacity of super-intelligence: machines can compute faster, more efficiently and accurately than humans, but cannot feel, perceived, imagine like we do and this causes relevant worries. The real issue raises when “the AI objectives are not aligned with ours”⁶ claims Future Life Institute. For example, let’s think at an autonomous car programmed for bringing the passenger to destination *as fast as possible*, it will diligently bring them there but “probably covered in vomit”⁷ taking literally your commend. Similarly, for accomplishing

⁶ <https://futureoflife.org>

⁷ <https://iq.intel.com/artificial-intelligence-is-good-for-society/>

⁸ <https://futureoflife.org/background/benefits-risks-of-artificial-intelligence/>

⁹ Kahneman, D. (2011) *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

its program and saving the life of its passengers, an autonomous driving car may seriously endanger the surroundings. Such issues cannot be solved only with formulas and codes, they demand for skills like empathy, compassion and vision. In order to find a balance and pursue continuous learning, our focus has to shift from short term to long term and encompassed a wider range of abilities. To integrate systems in companies and institution in a real beneficial way, interdisciplinary is required. The future workers cannot think only in terms of numbers and analysis, they must have a bigger perspective, know how to think out of the box, see knowledge as one interconnected, dynamic treasure, not as the practical instructions for executing a task. Machines, indeed, are shaping the future of jobs, by providing us with increasingly growing automatic procedures, computational skills behind imagination and huge amount of data but they will always need human to *think* solutions, *interpret* data, *understand* implications, *imagine* alternatives. In this sense, the Automation Era is giving us a chance to become more human, restore our balance, rediscover the dark night of the soul in every of us. To this purpose, we need to look back and we may discover that the best way to manage the future is in the past.

Remember

Peter Drucker had a formidable grandmother: it was impossible not to think at her without a smile, cause she had her special own way to deal with modern society. Back in the days, the family made fun of her but, when growing up, Drucker understand how the grandmother naivety concealed wisdom. His grandmother was maybe a “just a stupid old woman” but she was also right, cause “she knew that community is not distribution of income and social services and the miracles of modern medicine. It is concern for the person”⁵. The value of grandmother, continues Ducker, are what XX century lacks. Concern for the person means attention, self-respect, dignity and love. That is how we can survive super intelligent machines.

I learnt it from my grandfather, he was a doctor back in the days in which being such career was a life mission. Few weeks before dying, when knew to have cancer, he climbed until the last floor of one patient’s building just to know how he was feeling. This story deeply moved me, I imagined him suffering at each steps yet determined to help someone in need, accomplish his duty until the last moment and make the difference. My grandfather took responsibility for the relationship⁴ with that patient, he focused on his contribution⁴ over his convenience. The only way to make sense of our life is interacting, contributing, collaborating with others. He understood it and, for me, this makes him a real Human.

My grandparents story is in line with Drucker’s Grandmother teachings: we need to build up community based on empathy, compassion, imagination, we have to feel belongingness, learn to cooperate for the benefit of all, ask ourselves what we can do for the others. By focusing on our diversity and uniqueness, each of us can add special value to its community, we just need to keep in mind the lessons of the past. That is why it is essential for management to keep human at its core, in order to bring social improvement. Only if we learn to respect the person, AI will cease to be a danger to become an opportunity, an ally to enhance our humanity and aid community.

The Ultimate Question

To come back at our *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*", the story goes on and a new computer, so big to resemble a planet, with organic life forms as part of its matrix is built up to find, this time, the Ultimate Question. The computer is called the Earth and the living forms humans.¹At last, the secret of life is not about the answers, the data you got, but about the questions you ask. A computer cannot make sense of life, only us, as human beings, can find the ultimate question. But the only way to success is living together, collaborating with each other, learning how to create, feel, remember as human beings.