

## **Both Sides Now: A Druckerian Approach to Bouncing Back**

I am a millennial who is convinced that he is an old soul. Trust me, I checked all the boxes [here](#) and the much longer list [here](#). To be an old soul means not only adoring mid-century modern houses and furniture (undeniably, I fancy them and even adopted this design aesthetic in my apartment). Too, not merely listening to Frank Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald (although I actually prefer songs of the '30s to the '70s). It goes beyond loving vintage items and cars. An old soul is someone who is introspective, sentimental, and feels connected. That is why I prefer old songs. There is something with them that makes me muse, gush, and thrilled. So let me officially start this essay by reflecting on what is one of the most insightful songs ever written.

### ***If Peter Drucker were a movie, Both Sides Now would be the theme song***

In the 1960s, Joni Mitchell composed *Both Sides Now*. A song that is as bitter as much as sweet, it presents the journey from being juvenile to profound. It shows how, in our youth, we view things compartmentally and how, as we mature, we approach them holistically. That there is more to clouds than simply blocking the sun, or to love than just fairy tales, or to life than just tears and fears.

In a way, the song captures the entire principles of Peter Drucker. According to him, *“human being excels in coordination. He excels in relating perception to action. He works best if the entire human being, muscles, senses, and mind, is engaged in the work.”* Drucker believed in being holistic. He is holistic in terms of methodology. He “had the uncanny ability to interlink knowledge from different disciplines.”<sup>i</sup> He integrated in the field of management other disciplines such as psychology, economics, and politics. But not only that, Drucker was a “true integrator of theory and practice.”<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, he was not only a scholar but also a practitioner, having consulted by a number of companies, whether large or small. Similarly, he was holistic with respect to what the objectives of management should be. Long before “corporate social responsibility” and “environmental, social, and corporate governance” have become buzzwords, and even when his idea subsequently went against the very zeitgeist of those times<sup>iii</sup> – when cash is considered king and shareholders’ interest supreme – Peter Drucker already prophesied:

“An important task for top management in the next society’s corporation will be to balance the three dimensions of the corporation: as an economic organization, as a human organization and as an increasingly important social organization. Each of the three models of the corporation developed in the past half-century stressed one

of these dimensions and subordinated the other two... None of the three is adequate on its own."

Management, to be successful, must be holistic. It must borrow from other disciplines and must be tested in practice. Leadership, to be effective, must also be holistic. It must do the right thing, *that is*, not to be fixated on profits alone. But what does being holistic have to do with bouncing back? Well, it has everything to do with bouncing back.

### **Back to "Bouncing Back"**

To "bounce back" means "to return quickly to a normal condition after a difficult situation or event."<sup>iv</sup> The picture that usually comes to mind is a ball falling down, hitting the floor, then quickly rebounding. In fact, this is what the theme of this year's challenge implies – to emerge stronger after setbacks. This is bouncing back as we know it, although there is another one I will discuss later. The best example of this is my home country when it was hit by, at that time, the strongest typhoon in the world.

The Druckerian approach to bouncing back from setbacks can be summed up in this statement: "*Problems have to be taken care of, of course; they must not be swept under the rug.*" The first step is to acknowledge the problem. And this requires two things: humility and humanity. To deal with it is the next step.

One cannot address the challenges brought by the setback if one does not recognize its existence. Hence, humility is needed. The proximate cause of the devastation is the failure to recognize the impending danger. Alarms were sounded already by international weather bureaus. But our government, both national and local, was as much unprepared as it was in denial. So, too, are the people living in the previously identified calamity areas. In a way, it is understandable. Ours is a country of typhoons. Perhaps they were thinking that Typhoon Haiyan is just one of the dozens of storms annually hitting our country? Still, hubris, not humility, prevailed. As a result, Typhoon Haiyan was the costliest typhoon in our modern history, leaving damaged properties amounting to almost US\$3 Billion. Sadly, it was also the deadliest. Typhoon Haiyan killed almost 10,000 people. Dead bodies piled up as soon as the storm and flood subsided. But more than these, countless and nameless victims were left traumatized by the loss of loved ones; many of them still unable to locate the remains and accord proper burial. It was not just a typical setback. For us, it was the setback of all setbacks. And that happened at a time when our economy was starting to take off.

We also have to accept all normal emotions that come with the problem. Ignoring is just sweeping under the rug. Humanity, therefore, must be acknowledged. Only until

this can we start dealing with the problem. And so my country mourned for years. Many played the blame game as the victims quietly grieved their loss. Many formed groups and demanded more accountability from the government. What made it a bit bearable were the rise of volunteerism, the humanitarian assistance that came from almost 50 countries and supranational organizations and, as the only Christian nation in Asia, the visit of Pope Francis. Our country is highly regionalistic, but volunteers and donations poured from all parts of the nation, especially from the private sector. We felt seen by the world and, through the pope, by God. More people became aware of the perils of climate change. Government performance was closely monitored. That calamity, while truly a horrible curse, became a blessing as well. A previously unknown cave was uncovered when the typhoon left trees and greens destroyed. Now, it is a famous tourist attraction.<sup>v</sup> Also, the areas badly hit have been showing signs of recovery. Clouds that rained on everyone appear now, slowly but surely, as ice cream castles in the air.

I, too, have had a fair share of this setbacks. I will use them to illustrate the next step of the Druckerian approach. Nevertheless, before they be branded as petty, allow me to give a brief background of myself. I have this unhealthy fixation to stay on top. Not that I was born this way. I was an average student in elementary school. Come high school, there was a teacher who believed in me, who inspired and encouraged me. Just an aside, Drucker was correct: *"[a] great teacher can change your life in thirty seconds."* I graduated top of my batch in high school. I was offered admission by the most prestigious universities in my home country. Buoyed by that achievement, I thought as long as I put effort into everything that I really want, nothing can stop me from achieving my dream. Boy, I was wrong!

Looking back, I subscribed without much reflection to what Drucker said: *"We live in an age of unprecedented opportunity: If you've got ambition and smarts, you can rise to the top of your chosen profession, regardless of where you started out."* In fact, that was what my parents, teachers, and even the 90s popular culture have told me. I thought sheer will, coupled with serious effort, will suffice. But Drucker, ever wise, already gave a warning; one I missed. *"If you have more than five goals, you have none."* I was stretching myself too thinly. I still graduated with honors, but not on top; and I believe I did not make any significant impact on the student organizations I joined and served.

I was too stubborn that I carried this wrong notion in law school. While I was given a scholarship, I had to work part-time to finance my living expenses. Because I wanted to make the most out of law school, I again stretched myself too thinly. I was top of my batch for the initial years of law school. A year after juggling between studies and work and extra-curricular activities, my grades suffered. I almost failed a subject, which never happened to me before. In hindsight, these words of Drucker were helpful: *"A crisis that*

*recurs a second time is a crisis that must not ever occur again.*" I lessened my involvements in a number of student organizations and slowly turned my attention to my first love – an advocacy that I have even before I entered law school. Drucker was certainly correct when he said: *"If there is any one secret of effectiveness, it is concentration. Effective executives do first things first and they do one thing at a time."* While I graduated second of my law school batch, I became truly effective in the thing I loved most: my advocacy on legal education reform.

Concentrating more on my advocacy, getting deeper in it through research, and finally deciding to write something about it yielded great results. One good thing about this competition is the opportunity to be anonymous. This is to my benefit because I come from a country where sharing achievements is a taboo. I share them now, never to brag, but to show that Drucker's advice can lead to desirable results. I was appointed by our country's president to serve as commissioner in a national government agency that regulates all law schools. At that time, I was the youngest government appointee to an agency that is not related to youth affairs. For my public service and law school academic achievements, I was awarded one of the ten outstanding students of my country, the oldest and most prestigious student awards, at the palace of our president. I was also the lone student presenter in a conference of law deans and professors. I went on to serve under two presidents. I was granted a prestigious foreign government scholarship to learn more about my advocacy. All these led to my establishment of a research and advocacy center to help craft policies introducing meaningful reforms in our country's legal education system. And just recently, I was invited to serve as part of the steering committee that implemented a legal education reform project, the first one to be funded by our national government.

So, how do we deal with problems? Drucker has this to say. *"A person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weakness, let alone on something one cannot do at all."* He advised us to stop spreading ourselves too thinly, to familiarize ourselves with our strengths, and to concentrate all our efforts following the list of priorities we have carefully identified.

### **The "Other" Bouncing Back**

There are two points I wish to make in order to better expound on this other form of bouncing back. To aid us, I will use the image of a ball bouncing back off a wall.

When you consider its etymology,<sup>vi</sup> the verb "bounce" came from an early 13<sup>th</sup> century German word *bounsen* which means "to hit." In this broad sense, when a ball bounces, it simply means it hits something. A ball thrown onto the floor bounces back.

And so, when it is thrown at the wall or even the ceiling. Simply put, there are a number of things a ball can hit before it bounces back. The proverbial “wall” can mean a lot of things, not only a setback. This is my first point.

This becomes more true when we understand that its modern iteration have also been influenced by the 17<sup>th</sup> century French word *bondir*, from which the word bound is derived, which means “jump.” However, remember that while you can jump up, you can likewise jump down. So, yes, we bounce back from setbacks. But a more holistic view will compel us to bounce back even from our successes. This, I believe, is the other aspect of bouncing back. Peter Drucker put it succinctly, “[a] success that has outlived its usefulness may, in the end, be more damaging than failure.” We move on from defeats. We move on as well from victories. Especially if they soon become the very obstacles to maximizing our potentials. Notice what Drucker said, “[t]here is nothing worse than doing the wrong thing well.” He did not say evil thing, he said wrong thing. An evil thing done well is wrong. But so is a good thing done in a wrong time. And even a good thing done instead of the best thing. Successes, even those unexpected, require careful thought, and Drucker always insists that we emerge stronger because and in spite of success:

“Thus, the unexpected success is not just an opportunity for innovation; it demands innovation. It forces us to ask, What basic changes are now appropriate for this organization in the way it defines its business? Its technology? Its markets? If these questions are faced up to, then the unexpected success is likely to open up the most rewarding and least risky of all innovative opportunities.”

Second, we look at the ball. The capacity to bounce back – which earlier I mentioned not being solely determined by the wall it hit – is also not a function of the size of the ball. A basketball<sup>vii</sup> can easily and quickly bounce in a way that a cannon ball used in the American Civil War, albeit just half an inch bigger, cannot.<sup>viii</sup> Pools and racquetballs are exactly the same size. But when dropped to the floor, one cannot bounce while the other can.

The same wall that makes one ball bounce can make another ball break, even if the balls are exactly of the same size. The capacity to bounce back is determined by what the ball is made of – polymers, usually rubber. This material gives the ball its elasticity. Physicists define elasticity as an “object’s ability to return to its original shape after being stretched or squeezed.”<sup>ix</sup>

Many businesses plateaued because leaders became complacent; worse, many successful ones collapsed because they did not want to change. In his 1993 essay,<sup>x</sup> Drucker used Xerox and the Big Three American car manufacturers as examples of

companies that became complacent. To be fair, Drucker also mentioned that profit reflects the validity of business. These companies may have believed that soaring profits and stock prices were the proof of being on the right track! However, Drucker's premise in making that statement is the mistaken view that profit should be the purpose of a business. He did not say outright that profitability means the company is treading the right path. In fact, in the same essay, Drucker said that the first mistake businesses can make is to worship high profit margins. Sky-high profits can become blinders. That is why he reminded us that *"high profit margins do not equal maximum profits."* Winning the battle does not automatically result in winning the war.

Furthermore, many businesses do not want to change. Part of it is because they do not know when to stop. As Drucker astutely observed, *"[m]ost leaders don't need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop."* Learning when to stop pursuing high profits so we can finally turn to optimal profits is a form of moving on. Learning when to stop maintaining the same business model so we can adapt to the changing demands of customers is bouncing back; especially when we consider what Drucker famously said: *"the purpose of a business is to create a customer."* And learning when to stop the same organizational system is to spring forth. Bouncing back from short-term successes into long-term victories, from capturing battles to succeeding in the war, requires elasticity. Bouncing back demands the ability to change. This is the very reason why Drucker encouraged entrepreneurs – and by extension – leaders to always search for change, to respond to change, to exploit change as an opportunity. Undeniably, *"[t]he earlier changes are discerned, the earlier the opportunities they create can be converted into innovations."*

### **The Druckerian Approach is a Holistic Approach**

Joni Mitchell's song is as deep as Peter Drucker's writings. From clouds that move up and down, to love that gives and takes, to life that wins and loses, and to everything in between, this sense of a whole, this vision of the big picture, and this taking of the long view – all of them imply the need to be holistic. The Druckerian approach to bouncing back is a holistic one. We move on from setbacks in the same manner that we move on because and in spite of success. We pause, we stop, we focus on our strength, we change, and we bounce back.

## Word Count: 2,995

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