

Contemplations of a Millennial on Developing a Renaissance Manager

Last July, as I stared down the blood test report in front of me, I knew my life was going to change in a big way. I was frightened and anxious. On the professional front, I had just moved to a new role in my current organization. On the personal front, the blood test report had confirmed I was pregnant!

When I expressed my anxieties to my husband, he assured me that women are conditioned to become holistic managers, empathetic enough to sympathize with the people they engage with, yet focused enough to push their agenda through. He described how his grandmother ran his ancestral house, when it was still in the throngs of the joint family setup. Despite having limited education, she managed the servants and women to do the household chores, work at fields, milk the cows and look after the kids. She optimized supplies to ensure that there was enough food made for the family, which was served to men, children and women in that order. Basically she ensured the smooth functioning of a 25-member organization – the joint family. What is more noteworthy about her was she held the family together at a time when the joint family structure around them was crumbling into nuclear households due to urbanization, property disputes etc. “Think of this as just another project,” he said referring to my current role, “You figure out how to manage the same and I can support you.” In other words, he wanted me to be a manager who used both sides of the brain like the polymath, Leonardo da Vinci.

Who is a Renaissance Manager?

Leonardo Da Vinci is the most famous Renaissance man or polymath – well rounded and knowledgeable across different disciplines. Leonardo considered himself a disciple of experience and received wisdom. He believed that progress of Science came from dialogue¹. Similarly, the renaissance man of 21st century, Peter Drucker believes tomorrow’s manager needs two preparations – knowledge he gains before becoming a manager (received wisdom) and the learning after he becomes a manager over time (experience).

Renaissance can hit home even in the modern age. When I meant home, I was referring to Muscat – my home for 17 years from 1990s to mid 2000s. From what my dad told me, before the reign of the incumbent Sultan, Sultan Qaboos, Oman was literally a sorry state - Poor infrastructure, unpaved roads, a couple of schools and a single hospital, high unemployment with rampant corruption².

This changed when the current Sultan came to power. He ended Oman’s economic isolation by establishing friendly ties with Oman’s neighbors and West. In fact, Oman has managed to stay neutral in an increasingly polarized world, maintaining friendly ties with both Iran and USA. He ended insurgency, abolished slavery and modernized the country’s infrastructure. Being a musician himself, he set up his own symphony orchestra and restored Omani pride in her heritage. Western sciences were introduced along with liberal arts in the school curriculum. Although a Muslim country, Oman had Christian, Hindu and Buddhist places of worship. All these changes gave way to Omani renaissance, which catapulted Oman into a modern nation. In fact, November 18th every year has been celebrated as Renaissance Day.

¹ Isaacson, W. (2018). *Leonardo Da Vinci*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

² Based on anecdotal evidence and En.wikipedia.org. (2019). *Qaboos bin Said al Said*. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qaboos_bin_Said_al_Said

The current Sultan had a managerial vision, collaborated with nations to upgrade the military and to modernize its infrastructure; and used a combination of approaches to bring peace and stability within the nation³. When Jokha Al Harthi, an Omani, became the first Arabic writer to win the prestigious Booker prize this year⁴, you know Omani Renaissance has borne the fruit of the seeds it sowed years back.

Therefore, I believe, a Renaissance Manager is a person with multi-domain knowledge whose able to see things hitherto unseen by the common manager. He has a bias for action, who after analyzing the facts, takes a call on the right action for his team/organization based on his intuition and experience⁵. To get the right intuition, one needs to build one's knowledge and experience from interacting with people who are more specialized across different fields. This accumulated experience can help connect the dots and spot emerging trends, thereby seeing things unseen, leading to the right intuition.

Why we need a Renaissance Manager?

Multiple specializations and multi-domain knowledge are increasingly becoming the norm of the day. For example, to manage across departments requires a sound knowledge of the functioning of each department (technical know-how) and managing people, which is an art. Renaissance managers are more relevant in today's context – be it the family, the smallest organization in society; the startup, the large corporation or even a country (as in Oman's case). Some of the reasons are as follows:

1. Dynamic Environment
2. Increasing diversity
3. Millennial work force
4. Transition into a gig economy and a networked world

Each of these situations demand a Renaissance Manager at the helm to help the organization survive these changes.

1. *Dynamic environment* –

Machiavelli, another Renaissance thinker and a Da Vinci contemporary, had written, “Whoever desires constant success must change his conduct with times.”⁶ The world is ever changing. The organizations which survive and grow are the ones who change as per the market conditions or as Drucker said, *create the market forces based on their need*. The advent of technology coupled with the internet boom has allowed some organizations to grow in leaps and bounds (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon) while others have gone bankrupt (Kodak). Policies, taxes, concessions, immigration laws etc. keep changing. Continuous improvement of the product / service is important to stay relevant.

Marketing and innovation are the two basic functions of a business enterprise, according to Peter Drucker. Both are required for the organization to survive. To focus on marketing, “What does our customer find valuable? is the most important question companies can ask themselves.”⁷ Innovation, in turn, requires people to change – their work, habits and group relations. While man has a capacity to learn

³Encyclopedia Britannica. (2019). *Qaboos bin Said | sultan of Oman*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Qaboos-bin-Said>

⁴Flood, A. (2019). *Man Booker International prize: Jokha Alharthi wins for Celestial Bodies*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/21/man-booker-international-prize-jokha-alharthi-wins-celestial-bodies-oman>

⁵Drucker, P. (2017), *Practice of Management*.

⁶Machiavelli, N. and Rehorn, W. (n.d.). *The prince*.

⁷Inc.com. (2019). *Drucker from A to Z*. Available at: <https://www.inc.com/articles/2009/11/drucker.html>

fast, his unlearning is difficult (resistance to change). Only way to get around this is to make the ability to unlearn a part of the learning process (accepting change). The entire demand for worker's ability to change requires positive action for him to make it possible to change⁸. To enable the right focus on marketing and innovation requires a good manager at the helm.

This theory by Drucker was confirmed by De Jong et al. by research. To enhance individual innovation among the employees, managers must:⁹

1. Create a positive atmosphere – By giving employees sufficient autonomy to carry out their tasks and recognize initiatives and innovative efforts.
2. Monitor / measurement by objectives – Some degree of monitoring is necessary, although excessive monitoring may lead to bad vibes. The onus is on the manager to use his wisdom to draw that line.

Doing both these require a synthesis of art and science. The dynamic nature also means the manager must be able to work in ambiguity, define a structure for the work and the team to better monitor, be aware of the small details both within the organization and external forces to steer the team and organization in the right direction.

Dynamic nature of work environment also means learning new skills to stay relevant in the market. This could be achieved by:

1. Starting small – Trying out a new skill or craft on a smaller scale before taking it big (pilot study)
2. Diverse peer groups – Moving in different peer groups would help to view problems from a different lens. It also breeds collaboration for a new project.
3. Connect the dots – Be aware of trends / triggers of change and how better can the team/organization/ manager use it to gain advantage in the market.

2. Increasing Diversity

Growth of multinationals, cross-country mergers and acquisitions, immigration, demand for new skills, pricing and the dynamic environment have led to a diverse group of clients, customers and employees. Homogeneity breeds herd mentality- the antithesis of innovation. Diversity, on the other hand, in the form of skills, gender, age, nationality, educational & professional background etc. brings a potpourri of ideas and requirements to the table. The ideas and requirements enable thinking differently, thus fostering innovation.

Drucker believed in inviting dissent and debate in meetings for them to be productive¹⁰. Diversity aids in productive meetings with a new lens to debate collaborate. *Divina Proportione* was a collaborative work, written by mathematician Luca Pacioli with illustrations by Leonardo da Vinci, both intellectuals in Milanese court.

⁸Drucker, P. (2017), Practice of Management.

⁹de Jong, J. and Den Hartog, D. (2007). How leaders influence employees' innovative behaviour. *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 10(1), pp.41-64.

¹⁰Inc.com. (2019). *How to Be a Drucker-Like Leader*. Available at: <https://www.inc.com/leigh-buchanan/10-traits-of-a-drucker-like-leader.html>

To take advantage of diversity, a manager must be open to new ideas and new mindsets, think outside the box, collaborate across disciplines and have a keen eye for detail.

In my current role, for any organization-wide project, a SPOC is nominated from every department who is present in all meetings. The diversity of experiences of the different SPOCs gives a new lens to look at issues which could come up during Go Live and the solutions for the same. This also ensures all gaps are looked into at the ideation phase itself, ensuring a smoother implementation.

3. *Millennial workforce*

Being a Gen Y myself, we are young, passionate about what we do and hate inefficiency. We have varying interests, a keen eye for detail and a desire to prove ourselves. My peers and I would like to have a manager we trust and believe in to channel our energies in the right way. He must also be someone whose open to ideas and willing to experiment. Most of my peers from premier institutes chose to quit government jobs after a couple of years due to the importance of seniority over performance in deciding promotions. A meritocracy culture with measurement by objectives would help in retaining talent. These traits were reiterated by Peter Drucker on managing the professional employee or “specialists or white collared workers” in today’s parlance¹¹.

4. *Rise of ecosystems and the gig economy*¹²

With growing specializations, a standard 9 to 5 desk job is giving away to flexi time, flexi location / remote location stints. Organizations now choose to focus only on their core competence with other work outsourced to specialists or agencies. For example, most organizations (including mine) prefer to outsource app development to a third party or bring in a freelancer for a short duration. An app developer is the “specialist” here. If he is also a UI/UX designer, that’s even better.

Organizations which survive are the ones who are form an essential component of an increasingly networked world. Activities outside the core competence but essential for the ecosystem are performed by roping in organizations/ free lancers with this competence via alliances and partnerships.

Within this context, the manager must be agile, have good negotiation skills, have regular cross-functional meetings to avoid thinking within silos and see the bigger picture.

¹¹ Drucker, P. (2017), Practice of Management.

¹² Harvard Business Review. (2019). *The 4 Things You Need to Thrive in the Gig Economy*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/03/thriving-in-the-gig-economy>

S.No.	Reason	Traits
1	Dynamic Environment	1. Work in ambiguity 2. define a structure 3. Take note of the smaller things / details 4. Create the right culture to foster innovation 5. Measurement by objectives 6. Marketing - figure out what customers find valuable or create a demand
2	Increasing diversity	1. Open to new ideas / new mindsets 2. Think outside the box 3. Cross-function/ cross disciplinary collaboration 4. Take note of the smaller things / details
3	Millenials/ youth entering workforce	1. Open to new ideas / new mindsets 2. Think outside the box 3. Risk taker/ willing to experiment 4. Rewards performance / measurement by objectives
4	Rise of ecosystems & Gig economy	1. Agile 2. Good negotiation skills 3. Cross-function/ cross disciplinary collaboration 4. Avoid thinking in silos 5. See the bigger picture

Traits of a Renaissance Manager:

Taking all this into account, the traits to expect from a Renaissance manager are as follows:

1. *Work in ambiguity*: Startups and new organizations need not necessarily have a definite approach to work. The manager must be able to work in uncertain environments.
2. *Define a structure*: Being methodical and creating a definite structure will help to better manage work and stakeholders. It also helps us keep track of our activities in a coordinated fashion.
3. *Take note of the smaller things / details*: This means listening and observing, going deep into a problem to figure out the root cause. Patching would stop the issue only so far whereas going into the root cause would eliminate the problem altogether.
4. *Open to new ideas and new mindsets*: For this to happen, respect for people and curiosity – both needs to be cultivated within the individual
5. *Focus on Marketing*: Figure out what customer finds valuable, else for a new product, create a demand
6. *Focus on Innovation*:
 - a. Create the right culture to foster innovation – This includes rewarding performance, allow risk taking, out of the box thinking and being agile
 - b. Measurement by objectives
7. *Collaboration*: Across departments, functions and disciplines. It would help bring out new products and services. It would also help create a valuable ecosystem for customers.
8. *Good Negotiator*: To drive the organization's agenda
9. *See the bigger picture*: This would ensure petty issues like egos don't come into play and prevent thinking in silos
10. *Visionary*: Spot trends to seize the right opportunity. It also ensures the organization is ready when change comes along.

One common issue to watch out for in renaissance managers are they will be perfectionists. Hence until strict deadlines are enforced, their projects could be delayed or they would not be perfect enough to turn in.

How to Develop Renaissance Managers?

Although each of us can work to develop on these traits, I believe family is where it all begins. Family is the smallest organization of a society, numbering from 2 onwards (to even 25 as my grandmother-in-law's case). It's also where the foundations of our character are laid. To instill holistic thinking, an equal appreciation of arts and sciences is required, which is best brought about at an early age.

Growing up in Muscat also helped that I was exposed to a diverse cross section of people. You learn to appreciate the fact that there are unique customs in every culture and respect that, while following your own. For example, the non-Muslims had their food during Ramadan, but were mindful of not eating in public and respecting our Muslim friends.

Being a passionate dancer, I received formal training in classical dance. Typically, Indian dances also feature dramas. During the course of my dance journey, what I realized was to become an accomplished dancer, learning dance alone was not enough. Along with the hand gestures and leg movements, I also had to learn music and rhythm; theatre and sculpture to better emote and capture the story; poetry to understand nuances of the language and the language itself the song is written in. The long hours of squatting, the definite way in which a hand gesture is expressed requires long hours of discipline, patience and perseverance – skills which I imbibed and have become a part of me, which are useful in my current role as a project manager. Moreover, raising a child is the ultimate project and where better to use these skills of a renaissance manager.

The education system does its bit to instill “the spirit of renaissance” in children, but as parents we can do the following:

1. *Instill a value system* – Which promotes integrity, truthfulness, be empathetic and Open to perspectives, tolerant, respect people but also respect facts. Drucker himself states: “There is one qualification the manager cannot acquire but must bring to the task. It is not genius; it is character.”¹³
2. *Expose to different cultures* –To accept diversity and expand one's horizons by travelling, reading books, interaction with people from other cultures in our circles.
3. *Promote wonder* – To always question the obvious. This spirit of curiosity is what promotes scientific temperament. Be curious, observe and analyze, take notes and respect facts. The Drucker household entertained intellectuals and luminaries of the day such as Joseph Schumpeter, Friedrich von Hayek, Sigmund Freud which played an important part in developing young Peter Drucker's holistic thinking¹⁴. Leonardo Da Vinci grew up in the countryside and looked to unravel the

¹³Drucker, P. (2012), Management

¹⁴Druckersociety.at. (2019). *Drucker's childhood and youth in Vienna* | Drucker Society. Available at: <http://www.druckersociety.at/index.php/peterdruckerhome/biography>

mysteries of nature. Besides the flight of birds, he also puzzled at what we seem to take for granted – for example, describing the tongue of a woodpecker¹⁵.

4. *Promote extracurricular & co-curricular activities* – To get outside the comfort zone and learn new skills. Drucker continued his lifelong learning by allotting every year to learn a new subject he knew nothing about and study it intensely.¹⁶ As parents and children, it's important to push our horizons of knowledge. After all, we are workers in the knowledge economy.

In an increasingly polarized world filled with contrasts - rampant misinformation along with information overload; xenophobia amid calls for diversity; results of research tainted in popular opinion - a whole-systems perspective is required to discover the truth. Hence, a renaissance manager has an increasingly vital role to play in the upcoming years and needs to be groomed in his early years itself. Summing up in Drucker's own words: "... The manager of tomorrow roots every action and decision in the bedrock of principles, that he leads not only through knowledge, competence and skill but through vision, courage, responsibility and integrity¹⁷" - basically balancing the left and right sides of the brain.

PS: I am mother to a 3-month old baby boy now. Parenting is my next challenge.

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¹⁵Isaacson, W. (2018). *Leonardo Da Vinci*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

¹⁶Inc.com. (2019). *Drucker from A to Z*. Available at: <https://www.inc.com/articles/2009/11/drucker.html>

¹⁷Drucker, P. (2017), Practice of Management