

Actualising Human Potential to Create Prosperity: The Synergy of Man and Machine

It was a hot, humid June morning in 2008 when I first visited an orphanage. My father had taken me to the *madrassa* located on the gardens of the India Gate. It was a quaint mosque with a fraction of it stretching over the nearby pond, and the children – all dressed in *kurta-pajamas* and wearing white caps on their little round heads – were playing around with the frivolous ducks. Inside the *madrassa* were slightly older kids, reciting the Qur'an. My father and I had greeted the imam (who himself had grown up at the *madrassa*); and donated a modest amount of money, along with some fruits and chocolates for the kids. It was the first time that I had decided not to spend all my birthday money on buying toys for myself.

Although one could debate whether any moment in life is so powerful that it influences a person's outlook significantly, I for one know that this visit to the orphanage changed my perspective towards what I wanted to become. Having been brought up in a modest middle class family in the capital city of New Delhi, I'd decided that I desired wealth and the subsequent capability to enjoy all the luxuries available to mankind even before I had turned 10. After my visit to the aforementioned orphanage, though, I still wanted to be rich and lead a hedonistic lifestyle – however, I wanted others to achieve their own ambitions as well. I reiterate: the experience changed my *perspective* towards what I wanted to become, and not *what* I wanted to become.

Almost a decade has passed since this incident, and I've applied the concept of inclusive growth towards whatever teamwork activities that I have undertaken. From group science projects in high school to supervising a team of direct sellers during my college years, I have realised that working on the basis of genuine concern for every team member's needs in order to facilitate prosperity for all is a wondrous method of effective leadership. Not only does it help in achieving the overall goal of the team, but it also provides a sense of accomplishment to everyone involved; thereby converting what would've been post-work fatigue into dignified happiness. The power of inclusive thought is further substantiated by the following passage from *The Essential Drucker* –

“Management is about human beings. Its task is to make people capable of joint performance, to make their strengths effective and their weaknesses irrelevant. This is what organisation is all about; and it is the reason that management is the critical, determining factor.”

Why, then, in our rapidly-growing, virtually interconnected society, is prosperity so difficult to find?

A Comprehensive Approach to Prosperity

“I do not want India to be just an economic superpower. I want India to be a happy country.”

- JRD Tata, on reception of the Bharat Ratna (1992)

What indeed do we mean by prosperity? Instead of taking the theoretical, economics-based approach to defining this term, I propose to view it from a philosophical perspective. Happiness in itself does not comprise prosperity; just the way that money does not comprise wealth. Both happiness and money are invaluable factors of prosperity and wealth respectively, but by themselves they are rather inadequate. To elaborate, the difference between happiness and prosperity is that of *time*: prosperity is a flow variable, and happiness is a stock variable. In simple terms, the accumulation of joyful contentment across all spheres of one’s life – material, social, spiritual, and mental – over a period of time makes one prosperous; just as the accumulation of money over a period of time makes one wealthy.

Prosperity is a substantial indicator of actualised human potential. Notwithstanding the room for error of the halo effect^{*}, it can be observed that a prosperous person is often one who works with a vision and dedication which brings about an emphatic feeling of accomplishment once the task is done. However, it can also be observed that only a modicum of employees all over the world are able to realise a significant portion of their potential. A major reason for this, as the eminent Peter Drucker wrote in his article for the Harvard Business Review in 2002, is that the management tends to forget that they are not employees – they’re *people*¹.

Beyond the Tag of an Employee

“Always treat your employees exactly as you want them to treat your best customers.”

- Stephen R. Covey

Language has an overbearing, yet subtle impact on our subconscious thought processes. This has been explored sedulously by the renowned transitional justice authority Rupert Ross in his essay, ‘Towards a Fluid Reality’. Ross explains how the aborigines of Canada are always mindful of their language, since they know the harsh implications an inappropriate word or sentence might have upon the feelings and even the lives of others. Due to this reason, the indigenous people prefer to use more adjectives and fewer nouns; for nouns are conclusive statements that form a subconscious image of a person in our minds. From a criminological viewpoint, Ross has written that someone who has committed a crime is not termed ‘an offender’ in

^{*} A cognitive bias that influences an observer’s opinion on a person’s characteristics based upon the observer’s overall impression of that person.

these aboriginal groups, but is instead looked upon as ‘a person who has committed an offense’. The indigenous people believe that to judge a person based on one wrong act and label him a criminal would only further ostracise him from the community, instead of helping him make amends for his faults and restore balance in the entire society. The aborigine communities of Canada have the idea of mutual interdependence and spiritual interconnectedness rooted in their cultures, as a result of which their justice processes are more effective and genuine happiness is prevalent despite an apparent lack of hefty material possessions².

To bring the analogy into perspective, I have personally witnessed that considering a subordinate to be much more than just a worker/employee is an idiosyncrasy of great leaders. When I started working part-time with a direct selling business organisation to enhance my skills (I believed practical experience was important since I was a business studies major) during my early college days, I had two superiors – one whom I reported to directly, and the other (who was the former’s senior) whom I spoke to in case my immediate superior wasn’t available. A marked difference was noticeable when either of them gave me suggestions to improve my work; the immediate superior’s instructions were direct and blunt, while the senior superior had an unfeigned concern about my thoughts on the task to be executed, and how I could use my knowledge of unrelated topics to formulate a winning strategy through mental regression analysis. The relationship was more than a superior-subordinate one, and I felt an equal part of a team. Indubitably, I achieved my purpose of developing my selling skills; and he achieved the organisational objective of generating revenue. It was only later when I read parts from *The Practice of Management* in my college curriculum that I realised how effectively my senior had made use of Drucker’s concept of Management by Objectives. I recall being extremely surprised about how those principles, written more than half a century ago, were so relevant and useful despite all the mammoth changes through the passage of time.

As I honed my leadership and managerial skills and climbed up the scalar chain, I ensured that I viewed all my subordinates as equal parts of the whole team and recognised that they are more than just salespeople; that every individual is an eclectic composition of thoughts, beliefs, desires, fears, and aspirations. I believe that one of the major reasons that people aren’t able to grow in any organisation is a lack of both formal and informal communication. This is often a result of weak relations between the managers and the employees, and the former considering the latter to be just people they need to manage. My approach to recognising my subordinates as my friends who worked in the industry of direct selling, and not as a mere group of salespeople that I had to lead, helped in developing excellent interpersonal relations. Due to the bonds that were created, they became more open about their work-related, and even personal issues; which I helped them resolve to the best of my abilities. Better relations meant better communication, and better communication meant better business. It was as simple as that. To reiterate Drucker’s thoughts from *Managing in*

the Next Society – “the key to greatness is to look for people’s potential and spend time in developing it.”

Culture Eats Strategy For Breakfast

Although there is no proper citation available for this quote to link it to Drucker, it is one of my absolute favourites and one that I followed sedulously at the direct selling organisation. There were times when I had to manage a team of more than 30 students, and although this was a challenge I sought to champion, I was but a mere student and no management executive myself. I’d realised early on that trying to appease everyone to ensure that they all participated and followed the team strategy was a near-impossible task. In order to facilitate maximum participation and strategy implementation, I strived to develop a certain culture within the team. It became mandatory for members to contact their immediate superior twice every day – once in the morning and once at night – even if no work had been done. The idea was to give feedback of the day’s activities and the next day’s work; as well as to discuss any problems they may have encountered. A team schedule was formulated – weekends were for studying, weekdays were for college and sales presentations, and Thursday was the team hangout day where we would all go for a movie or some fun activity like ice-skating. Such a culture increased friendships, coordination and cooperation amongst members; and inclusive prosperity was developed. The effect in performance levels was also rather evident – when the team culture came into complete fruition, sales became a simple routine output of weekly activities. I was able to contrast the boom period with the time when I kept emphasising overall objectives to the team members – confidence was low, morale wasn’t too high either, and team spirit was hardly visible. Therefore, I believe that having the right culture and keeping strategy implementation a mere part of it is much more effective to help people actualise their potential.

Coercing or convincing a man to work for something he is unsure about hardly provides the required results. However, if he is introduced to an environment where following certain rules and norms to achieve objectives is the status quo; he is more likely to adapt to that culture, develop a clearer vision for his goals, and work with dedication to achieve them.

The Advent of Technology: Threats and Opportunities

“It’s not a faith in technology. It’s a faith in people.”

- Steve Jobs

I’d like to present an anecdote that would have a pervasive relevance throughout this chapter. When I was a beginner in the direct selling industry, I was a very timid, quiet, composed boy. I had my qualms about the practice of selling being too coercive, which was a major reason that I couldn’t make a good number of sales

in my early days. As a result, I felt pressurised to perform, which decreased my confidence further. When I finally discussed this problem with my senior, I received an answer that I've never forgotten –

“Pressure is a rather normal thing. What you need to know, however, is that it is neutral. Most people involuntarily assume it to be a problematic occurrence; while the truth is that it becomes positive or negative based upon how you respond to it. Try to view it as a challenge, as an obstacle you need to overcome. Even if you don't make the sale, you will certainly grow.”

I found out that this was a true statement. It is our natural tendency to view obstacles as problems and not challenges. When I resumed work with this new approach, I discovered that my sales presentations started becoming better, and business started to grow. The only difference was my response to the pressure.

What I want to convey is this: just the way that pressure has no negative or positive connotations, neither do technological changes. I validate this claim based upon Peter Drucker's take on technology in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities Practices* – “the technological impacts that the experts predict almost never occur.” Technological advancement is largely considered a boon for mankind despite the threats it poses to making a myriad number of human jobs obsolete in the coming decades. The key to ensuring that the advent of automation and artificial intelligence improves welfare, instead of filtering out sections of the working class, is enclosed within the basic notion of inclusive prosperity: having a genuine concern for everyone involved in the process.

Machines have been known to carry out manual work easily. However, as we stride towards the zenith of technology, machines have started to perform the tasks carried by educated workers. This has indubitably created a wave of mass anxiety about job security in both blue-collar and white-collar workers all across the world; and there is a vital need for them to respond...not react. Reactions are visceral and often irrational, based upon emotions rather than logic. Responses are based upon facts mildly influenced by emotions. In order to respond to the threats of job elimination, the most important thing that we need to know is the fact that the vulnerability of work being automated is directly proportional to its routine nature³. Therefore, to prevent those employed in routine work (whether white or blue collar) from becoming ostracised as automation propagates, the response has to be based upon developing their thinking and analytical skills. Essentially, in Drucker's terms, there is a need to create more knowledge workers – people who make use of their capacity of being a *homo faber*[†] to perform analytical work.

[†] Latin for “man the maker”, a concept that ascribes the ability to control fate and the environment to human beings.

From Automation to Prosperity

“Prosperity and growth come only to the business that systematically finds and exploits its potential.”

- Peter F. Drucker

In *Post-Capitalist Society* (1993), Drucker has written extensively about how the leading social group in business would be of knowledge workers who know how to apply their knowledge for productive use. The response that I propose to the threat of mass job elimination posed by the growth of automation is based upon the aforementioned concept of the knowledge worker – all sorts of work performed by employees needs to be divided into regular and irregular tasks. The routine work can be handled through automation, and the work that requires thinking abilities – decision making, teamwork, social skills – would be carried out by the knowledge worker. Although this sounds like a highly utopian and practically impossible solution, organisations have already started to work upon it. I present the case of Upskill, a tech company that provides Boeing with information goggles to facilitate the ease of production for their employees: the goggles work on voice controls and illustrate diagrams, calculations, and instructions to the employee while he/she is working on building the wire harness⁴.

Another factor to consider is that if the growth of artificial intelligence does have a massive impact on making human jobs automated; it would also free up a lot of people to take up entrepreneurship. Just the way that workers moved from the industrial sector to the service sector as it was increasingly automated, there is bound to be a shift from the service sector to another – it’s just not certain what this new sector will be. I posit that it could very well be entrepreneurship, for a new future of automated technologies would not come without a fair share of issues; and at its very core, entrepreneurship is all about solving issues in an organised manner.

A shift towards entrepreneurship is likely to induce greater prosperity as well for the people who possess the right skills, for entrepreneurship is a hugely rewarding activity when executed properly – both in a material and a spiritual way. Therefore, I claim that a positive response to the advent of technology by working on developing critical, social, analytical and entrepreneurial skills of both blue and white collar workers through rigorous learning processes would indeed result in a synergy of man and machine. Productivity would increase due to automation, and the knowledge workers would have more time to focus on the non-routine, interesting and challenging aspects of work. To conclude, it is of paramount importance for businesses all across the world to have a genuine concern for their employees; and develop them in the best possible way to create inclusive prosperity for all, through the progress of automation and artificial intelligence.

Continuous education is the key element in the entire process. As Peter Drucker wrote in one of his final books (*Managing in a Time of Great Change*), “I think the educated person of the future is somebody who realises the need to continue to learn. That is the new definition and it is going to change the world we live in and work in.”

References

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