

Drucker: The management 'Avatar'

One animation series, that has influenced me is titled 'Avatar: The Last Airbender', set in a mythical world, with only 4 nations named Air, Water, Fire and Earth, it tells the importance of balance. These nations' native population can control the element they are citizen of, so fire nation people can control (in the series it's called "bend") fire, so on and so forth. These nations are not very friendly, their powers coupled with their ambitions and greed can destroy their world, but there is one person who maintains balance, brings order and ensures that the world survives and thrives. This person is called Avatar, born in each generation in a different nation through cyclical reincarnation, Avatar is someone who can control all the 4 elements. He might not be as good as the best fire bender, but with his ability to control all the 4 elements, he can lead and perform better than the best fire bender.

Peter Drucker and his teachings reminds me of Avatar, he was a Renaissance manager, his management by objectives is about bringing a balance, among various departments and its super specialized experts who often refuse or are unable to change the lenses through which they see their organization, by unifying vision and as the people who run the companies delve into specialization, we need this balance and that is possible through generalization, where these generalist can lead the specialist and help an organization thrive.

Balance: Snippets from my work experience

I started with a bachelors in Mechanical Engineering, then I joined Operations in a Thermal power plant, I realized that my work would involve coordinating with maintenance team, Operations and Maintenance worked together but their KPIs are often in conflict with each other. Both are highly skilled in their job, have incredible knowledge related to their area, which often results in debates and discussions on how to do things. While this can be an amazing opportunity, often the "experts" would take things to their heart and the human ego will be affected. Needless to say, few things are as fragile as ego and we will waste time. Working in Operations, I started a workshop where best practices will be discussed at plant level and there were to be plant related challenges which needed to be solved in teams, and the teams were to be composed of cross functional members. There was a prize and to my spectacular surprise, cross functional teams came with amazing solutions to some very pressing problems. The mission of winning a prize when they worked

together made them more empathetic, drove them towards a common goal and helped them do good work overcoming their differences.

Later I did a Masters in marketing and joined a consumer goods company in Sales division. There I saw another version of this battle, Sales Vs Marketing. Each one thinking themselves to be the “right group” and each one dependent upon others to achieve revenue. Here I failed miserably. My suggestions of more interactions, were looked upon as undue interference. The executives encouraged the unhealthy competition and when I pointed out about how cooperation will be more effective method, I was chided publicly. I left that company to join a fintech startup in East Africa and within 8 months of my departure, the executives were sacked. The department started running into loses and the executives couldn't tame the beast they had created.

Now as I am doing an internship in San Francisco in strategy of a tech giant during my first year of double Masters (MBA in Strategy and MS in Business Analytics), I am seeing another type of company and learning a bit more about what it takes to thrive in the era of AI, machine learning and powerful intuitive technology. All these makes me realize that while companies may vary from selling salt to providing software, they all are facing the same challenges. Different departments and factions, see the world, the business differently and how to bring them towards common goals.

Do we even need specialist?

“We all have a vast number of areas in which we have no talent or skill and little chance of becoming even mediocre. In those areas a knowledge worker should not take on work, jobs and assignments. It takes far more energy to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence.” — Peter Drucker

We are in changing world; the biggest companies today are the ones that were not even founded when I was born. Companies are creating AI and Machine learning marvels who will solve challenges requiring critical thinking, the organizations need to evolve at a pace that they have never seen before. Hence specialists are the need of the hour. Deep knowledge and having expertise that helps one grow with time is a critical factor for companies competing today. But then why not have specialist run the Organization?

An organization is like a complex organism. Each specialist is like a particular organ. You cannot do without them but they are not the only requirement for the organism to thrive, so what do you

need? You need generalists, the renaissance manager, the polymaths, the avatar and you need them more than ever. They are the ones who can make sure that the specialist is able to connect with a uniform vision, that different specialists from different department are able to connect with each other, work in tandem. Generalists are the bridge, the binding agents which ensures that the organization thrives.

Can't specialist act as generalist, or the generalist become a specialist. The challenge is that while it is possible, it requires lot of effort, on part of the employee and the employer, on one had the skill set involved are different, so the employee needs to have the aptitude and skill set for both the roles. Then the employee also needs to understand the dynamics involved. The employers also need to invest in terms of training and opportunity cost when one employee is transitioning from one way to the other and that might not be possible for many companies.

What is this Avatar like?

“No institution can possibly survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized in such a way as to be able to get along under a leadership composed of average human beings” - Peter Drucker

The generalist leader is not specialist, but that does not mean that he/she is not an expert or unaware of the knowledge required. What a generalist leader does is have the understanding of various aspects deep enough to lead the experts, at the same time someone who can connect the dots and move the organization in the right direction, more than very deep knowledge, this requires following qualities

- 1) Vision
- 2) Courage
- 3) Empathy

Vision: Leaders need to have the vision regarding the direction in which they want to take the organizations, that vision requires not only knowledge related to different domains, but also how these different domains interact with each other, the frictions involved and the politics that needs to be tackled.

Courage: Change requires courage, it needs leaders to be out of their comfort zone. To face the group of people who are resistant to change and persuade or motivate them to change. Change is scary and unpredictable and the leader needs to use his vision and communicate that to rest of the team so that people come on board with the leadership

Empathy: But how can the leader use his vision and convince the rest of the team, by sheer empathy. Only when the leader has empathized with the rest of the team, he/she will be able to understand their fears, motivations and challenges in order to bring everyone on board and create a sense of uniformity of vision

But, Are we ready for the Avatar?

“Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision.”

— **Peter Drucker**

One of the essay prompts talk about developing tomorrow’s leaders and how to do it, but are we thinking if the corporate world is ready for the avatar? The polymaths? If we parallel the leadership evolution in political world, we see rise of populism, old outdated assumptions & conventions and short sightedness and people rewarding myopic visionaries rather than “boring” but much needed policy visionaries.

Unfortunately, corporate world too needs to evolve if it wants to be led by the modern leaders. Corporate world needs to change the way it measures success. From quarterly results to decade long plans, from earning monthly bonus to rewarding innovators whose innovation will be sustainable, organizations needs to adapt their way of working according to the generalists who will lead them in future with the aim of not only placating the shareholders, but creating an organization who is doing good for the world.

Uber’s recent scandals where young and new employee’s complaint of harassment was ignored because the accused was “top performer” is a tip of iceberg. We cannot nurture leaders of tomorrow if we don’t change the way and what we measure and how strongly we keep our ethics and values closer to us.

When companies buy expensive equipment’s, they do their due diligence on how to be ready for the equipment. Preparations are done, the requirements are worked upon. Similarly, companies need to be change themselves for the new leadership, it should be an environment where new

leaders will thrive, where long term vision is encouraged over the quick quarterly results, where internal competition is replaced with cooperation and future leaders are encouraged to think beyond.

For that the 'Leaders of Today' need to initiate changes, so that 'Leaders of Tomorrow' can thrive when they enter the upper management. From having strong whistleblower protection policies to encouraging risk taking behavior, present leadership needs to initiate the organizations to the direction evolution demands, for instance Google allows its employees to work on their own startup once a weekday and gives employees various support to succeed as well.

The Brave shall inherit the Earth

"If you want something new, you have to stop doing something old." - Peter Drucker

The world needs its Avatars, and we need them desperately, the problems we have created with a certain mindset requires to be solved with an evolved mindset, with interdisciplinary approach and here come the avatars, they generalists with the zeal to connect the dots and solve the problem by looking at them with a different view.

It's the responsibility of the world, the leaders of today, to nurture them, to encourage them to move around and break things, and above all, provide them an environment where they can thrive. It is our time now, we might be generalist or specialist, but we need to be the best version of ourselves, we might or might not be the avatar but we can definitely be brave enough to make the world a better place for the Avatar to thrive.

That's what Avatar Drucker dreamt of.