

# Setting the Stage for the Future: What Managers Can Learn from Theatre Directors

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## Introduction

The future is uncertain. This is the truth that all leaders face today. It becomes necessary now, more than ever, to draw from the experiences and insights from leaders across all disciplines. Inspired by the examples of Peter Drucker, I would attempt to draw three lessons that managers can learn from theatre directors.

Theatre directors may be seen as unconventional and egotistical – far detached from rigid image held by managers. Although it would be seen and discussed in the later part of the article that they too have similar goals, conventional wisdom suggests their disparity. In the quest for systemic innovation and effective team leadership, managers may also be able pick up something from the experience of theatre directors. But a common ground for this uncanny pair seems fitting to be established first.

## Casting Management and Theatre in the Same Stage

Management and theatre may be seen as characters from different plays. But from the Druckerian perspective however, the apparent difference between the two is minimized by categorizing management as a liberal art. As Drucker puts it, the term “liberal art” may be broken down into the two meanings of the words it possesses: (1) “liberal” pertaining to “the fundamentals of knowledge, self-knowledge, wisdom and leadership” and “art” pertaining to “practice and application”.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, the terms management and theatre can come to play in the same stage that we call, “liberal arts”.

Of course, each attends to a role of its own. The task of the theatre is generally to expose beauty through the collaboration of persons for a live stage performance. On the other hand, Drucker hails the task of management “to make people capable of joint performance through common goals, common values, the right structure and the training and development they need to perform and respond to change”.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note here that the mission of both the manager and the theatre director is *all about people*. This forms a greater synthesis to that task of managers and theatre directors: the leadership of effective teams.

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<sup>1</sup> Drucker, *The Essential Drucker: Selections from the Management Works of Peter F. Drucker*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

However, the definition of an effective team might slightly differ between a theatre director and a manager. A manager is primarily concerned that the team delivers the results expected from them defined by the manager. But the primary concern of the theatre director is that his vision is properly distributed to the entire production team and that every action of the team contributes to that vision. Basically, the theatre director's expected results lie in the transmission and expression of the vision. But this does not solely depend on the theatre director. A lot of team effort is vital to achieving this vision.

## Notes from the Director

To talk of expected results may not be usual for a theatre director. A simpler and more natural way to regard expected results in the point of view of a theatre director is through achieving a vision or a "directorial concept". The directorial concept is how the director takes the entire production to a unique interpretation of a script.

Although there is a lot of emphasis on unique interpretation, the responsibility does not lie ultimately to the director (even though it sometimes appears that way). Teamwork plays a vital role in creating this "unique interpretation". These concerns are similar to that of a manager's, especially if we treat the "unique interpretation" as a form of innovation.

If generally an innovation pertains to a new way of doing things; in the theatre sense, it pertains to a new take of seeing and expressing the play: the factor that differentiates it from other stage productions by different directors of the same play. In the management sense, this is important to gain market leadership as it may be seen as a provision of a product or service that cannot be offered by anyone else. But clearly, this may be seen as a demand for innovation.

The demand for innovation is important to both the theatre director and a manager as it can determine their success. Therefore setting up an environment conducive for innovation is imperative for both the theatre director and the manager.

But of course, creating and supervising innovation is easier said than done. The theatre has taught me that this complexity lies in the web of human interactions in the production team. A compelling vision for the production would be rendered worthless if the team cannot fully grasp the vision and therefore would be unable to execute it properly. But a simple idea could be transformed into a beautiful production if handled well. Simply put, managing innovation is certainly a leadership issue. The guiding idea is important but what is more important is how it is relayed to every member of the production team – from the actors down to the people who arrange the stage. Genius has less to do with it than suspected. It is definitely a skill – and skills may be learned and honed further.

As a theatre director, I could say that there are at least three main lessons that a manager can learn from my experience in terms of systemic innovation and effective team leadership: a good theatre director (1) collaborates, (2) co-creates his vision and (3) promotes shared responsibility. Each would be discussed more thoroughly in the succeeding sections. It would be discussed through (a) a short description of the lesson, (b) a short anecdote on my theatre experience, (c) a brief conclusion and (d) practical nuggets of wisdom for managers.

## Collaborate

Making everyone and everything work in the production team is clearly a directorial task. As oppositely suggested by conventional wisdom, this task is not as menacing as it seems. Maybe there are some quirky theatre directors out there, but do not be misled. Not all theatre directors are self-absorbed *prima donnas*. A good theatre director recognizes that he is amongst a pool of artists – and artists deserve respect. I have always welcomed everyone to give immediate feedback on my particular attack on the script. Treating everyone with importance allows everyone to open up and make informal conversations – and to me, this is by far the greatest source of my directorial success.

In my experience, these random informal conversations off and on-stage often become inspirations for certain breakthroughs. On one instance, I had my actor just joke around all of his lines in a scene wherein everyone expects it to be very dramatic. Instead of being angry and frustrated for disrupting the performance of the team, I was struck. That specific rehearsal triggered something in me as a director that I may not have thought of prior to that rehearsal. I had recognized that he was simply exercising his license as an artist to try things out. After the rehearsal, I had decided to change the entire tone of the play I was directing into a casual, light and funny conversation. I was simply convinced. From that point on, my directorial concept was transformed into approaching the play with more jest and friendly taunts. I had even given the actors the liberty to improvise some lines to make it more natural, but with my permission of course. Previous directors approached the entire play as a serious and dramatic confrontation. But to my surprise, even the playwright himself commended me for my version in making the play “more natural and believable”. I seriously cannot have done it if I had held on to my original concept.

Collaboration is not merely interacting with your team and making sure they do their tasks. Collaboration is making sure you do your tasks as a manager through interacting with your team. As Drucker puts it, “would be innovators must also go out, look and listen”.<sup>3</sup>

This does not mean constantly checking up on everyone's tasks. Doing this may even decrease productivity as it may raise stress levels in the work place. Allowing your team to be at ease for certain periods not only brings rest but also possible avenues for innovative ideas.

## Co-create the Vision

Crafting the vision is largely attributed to the theatre director. I say largely because it does not fall entirely to his shoulders. The initiative springs from the director, but every ripple is executed by each of the members of the production team. The director's task is to integrate everything into his vision: from the seating arrangement, down to every prop. But this does not exactly mean that everything is the doing of the director and everyone else follows orders. Again, as a director, it is important to see oneself as someone among a pool of artists and treat everyone with respect. Rather than genius, this task involves a lot of hard work.

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<sup>3</sup> Drucker, *Classic Drucker: Essential Wisdom of Peter Drucker from the Pages of Harvard Business Review*.

I also had worked as a playwright for a play festival. For most director-playwright relationships, it ends after handing the manuscript for the play. But our correspondence even stretched up to after the dramatic readings of the script. The director would consult me every time there would be rehearsals and the actors would also give comments on how they feel about the script. The environment promoted in that setup just made everyone feel that they can just jump in and give suggestions to make the play better. The director always welcomed suggestions. However this did not mean that he adopted every suggestion but he was flexible enough to incorporate our ideas into his vision. He made sure that everything contributes and still fits to his vision. He made it clear to us what works and what does not by spending countless hours on gathering suggestions and trying things out. The healthy flow of inputs and experimentations regarding the directorial vision was one of the reasons that led our group in winning the Best Overall Production for that year's play festival.

The talk about directorial talent gets the artistic and egotistic side of the theatre director pumping and kicking. But a good theatre director knows that he does not have all the brilliant ideas in the world. Co-creating the vision with your team allows room for improvement. Interestingly, Drucker admits that "above all, innovation is work rather than genius".<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes managers think very highly of themselves, and in turn, poorly of their team. So when it comes to idea generation, no idea would be better than the manager's. Testing out suggestions with the team on how things are run in the work place or even slightly considering them assures the team that their ideas are valuable and, in turn, they are valuable. Admitting that you do not have the best ideas also encourages the team to think. Allowing the team to explain, defend and critique each other's ideas creates not only an open environment, but furthermore platform for creative dialogue. As the manager, however, your task now is to properly arbitrate a healthy discussion that is still guided but not dominated by what you think is correct.

### *Promote Shared Responsibility*

Responsibility is sometimes seen in a bad light since it often pertains to the burden of blame. But responsibility should be more linked to the notion of ownership more than the negative connotation it carries. Ownership compels us to value things more and be responsible for them. Since we had already established that the vision is co-owned by everyone in the team, the responsibility of pursuing that vision to reality is also shared by the team. This promotes not only shared responsibility, but a deep commitment as well.

When I had acted for my first major play in the University theatre, I expected that my director would feed me everything and all I would do is to follow him. But as it turned out, he simply gave us his general vision for the production and then he worked with us on how certain specifics would play out. The vision he gave us was both simple and broad enough to play with. As a newbie, I thought that it was a terrible idea since there were only a few veterans with us and I was initially reluctant to give my suggestions. But through a series of discussions of how the play would look like, everyone pitched in, so I eventually joined. I was just playing a small role (with only about less than ten speaking lines) but I really felt I had definitely contributed something

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to the development of how the play would look like. This had really kept me going and allowed me to own the play. That is why even though I was just an actor for that play; I come really early to help the production crew set up the stage and even clean up at after every show and rehearsal. Even though I knew that the vision was not originally mine, I had grown to have some sense of ownership for it. I myself had understood the vision clearly and wanted to successfully turn that vision into reality.

Co-ownership is vital to shared responsibility. It is not enough for one person to pursue the vision; the entire team must seek to turn it into reality. Promoting shared responsibility transforms the team into committed and self-motivated individuals. If people are self-motivated, they would actively think and act on their own for this to happen.

Oftentimes, there would be members who would gladly breakaway from the team if they had been given the chance. This is very unhealthy for a team. Letting other members of the team lead certain projects for certain periods or at least asking them what they would do if they were given the chance to lead could also be sources of novel ideas and motivation. Instilling responsibility is internal and cannot be externally forced upon people. Asking them to recollect why they joined the team may help them rediscover their ownership for the team.

## Conclusion: Fostering Organic Unity

To summarize the three lessons from the theatre, I thought of three words: “fostering organic unity”. Organic unity is a term I borrow from poetry. It pertains to the coherent grand design of a poem. In the theatre sense, it may be rephrased as the directorial vision. But of course, achieving this vision is not as simple as it seems.

To explain how this is achieved, three general guidelines were given: (1) collaboration, (2) co-creation of the vision and (3) promotion of shared responsibility. Collaboration is making sure you do your tasks as a manager through interacting with your team. Co-creating the vision with your team allows room for improvement. Promoting shared responsibility transforms the team into committed and self-motivated individuals.

The verb I use to accurately describe the process involved in these three guidelines would be to “foster”. Therefore the term “fostering organic unity” encompasses all the three guidelines given. “Fostering organic unity” may help managers face the uncertainties brought by the future. With this, I hope that I have imparted the managers valuable insights that would help them create their future teams. As the stage is now set and the future still uncertain, we now turn to what Drucker had said, “the best way to predict the future is to create it”<sup>5</sup>.

## About the Author

Jose Romano S. Mira, 22, is a recent graduate of the Masters of Science in Industrial Economics from the University of Asia and the Pacific, Philippines. He has been active with the University Theatre (primarily Dulaang Rock Opera Company) for 5 years now as a director, playwright, actor and production crew.

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<sup>5</sup> Drucker, *The Post Capitalist Society*.

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