

Know yourself and focus on contribution – a reflection on Drucker’s “Managing Oneself”

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Introduction

Every day I fight a battle: the Ideal Self tells me to read a good book, soak up all the wisdom and reflect on it, while the Actual Self jumps from tab to tab on my web browser, skims through all those self-help articles like “How to procrastinate less” to “The one technique for better mental focus” pretending I am actually being productive even during the time I’m wasting. The Actual Self is the expert in telling excuses such as “*I need the Internet to do research for my work!*” and the Ideal Self is the little voice that asks “*Do you really need it, or are you simply avoiding the difficult work?*” Peter Drucker says managing oneself is tough; how about managing two selves in an era of information overload and instant distraction like now?

When was the last time we read something several pages long on our devices without getting distracted? Much has been said about the peril of multi-tasking: we think we “save” time in doing so, but research has shown that it takes us about 20 minutes to come back to our train of thought when we tackle a mentally demanding task. We know that quality work can only be achieved with focus, but how can we focus when our already limited attention is constantly interrupted by notifications from our devices?

In this age of information abundance, we have to aggressively filter our media consumption or we will end up with the mental equivalent of diabetes with our fast information diet. The danger goes beyond just sapping our ability to focus. This culture of instant access to information and the easy answer mindset can make us impatient. As a result, we miss out the chance to develop our tolerance to uncertainty and our capacity to pursue hard work. Perhaps most importantly, we don’t take the time to unplug to reflect on our own strengths, values and purpose, all of which are the crucial ingredients to our characters and fulfillment. In being constantly connected, we lose touch with ourselves.

FOMO

Fear of Missing Out, a common fear among the millennials, is magnified by the hyper-connection of this age. A friend commented on an application in my web browser that hides away all my Facebook feeds: “I hate wasting time on Facebook, but I am afraid I am missing out on news and updates from my friends”. But hasn’t the world always been buzzing with changes whether we know them or not? Aren’t we always missing out on something?

Why does that fear seem so prevalent today? To answer that question, consider a young person growing up a few decades ago: he would go through the traditional schooling system, acquire certain technical skills, and become a professional. Life and career options were fewer and often more structured. As such, he had time and space to grow without getting too overwhelmed. In contrast, a young person today is presented with so many options that it becomes paralyzing. These options are not only about what we can eat, buy,

or play but also about more significant matters like what career path we want to pursue and how we want to live our lives. On the plus side, being aware of more possibilities may explain why young people nowadays have higher expectations of ourselves and the work we do - how can we imagine selling our souls and our creative energy to become a cog in a machine? We look at a job beyond as a means to an end. We want to do work that matter.

However, when that awareness is not grounded in reality, FOMO can become a serious issue. As part of human nature we want to appear good and thus we don't talk about our failures as often as our successes. Oftentimes only the good stories make it to the headlines, and the digital age only magnifies this phenomenon. The Internet is fraught with successful stories of startup founders who become millionaires overnight, or lifestyle designers who work from home or anywhere in the world at whatever time they want. As a result, we have an overly rosy view of the world with the other sides of these stories often untold - the failures, pains, and sacrifices. We fear missing out because we only see the "good" parts.

Drucker articulated this problem in his essay *"in a knowledge society, however, we expect everyone to be a success. This is clearly an impossibility. For a great many people, there is at best an absence of failure. Wherever there is success, there has to be failure."* The danger of such skewed expectation, especially in an individualistic society that glorifies personal success, is that its counterpart - failure - may also be taken too personally. It then becomes a crippling shame instead of an empowering lesson.

The people I find "larger than life" are those who think big but act small. They are those who practice what Drucker says about managing oneself: work hard to improve on one's strengths and remedy bad habits that hinder one's potential. They understand that Success is a journey where they aim for smaller successes one after another, and not forget learning from every step along the way.

Understanding oneself

Perhaps the most important insight of Drucker's *Managing Oneself*, and in general his human-centered principles of management, is that one can and should invest in his personal development. Hard work and worthy challenges will stimulate one's growth, and frequent reflection through structured feedback analysis will ensure one does indeed develop in a productive direction for himself. Moreover, such reflection will also clarify one's values, which "are and should be the ultimate test" according to Drucker.

How can one start this process of understanding oneself? To me, journaling is a helpful tool for reflection. Thoughts in our heads are unclear until we pin them down into words. Some people prefer the familiarity of pen and paper; others may prefer typing on a computer. Stick with anything you choose for a while first. Since I committed to a regular time for a conversation with myself, I began to see myself much clearer: my strengths, weaknesses, habits, and values. I can step back and see myself overthinking, worrying, and panicking. Through this act of reflection, assumptions and judgments are surfaced and then systematically examined. Insights about myself and clarity about what to do next then come more naturally. *"Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action."* as Drucker advises us.

The most challenging and also strangest part of the journaling exercise is that it is hard to be honest with oneself. I once read somewhere this quote *"There are two reasons we do anything: the one we tell other people and the real one"*. Surprisingly, even though no one else will ever read my journal it is still hard to write out every thought or feeling I have. The process of coming to terms with oneself is slow and frustrating. It may even be frightening for some, but it is always rewarding. It is like taking a cold shower: at first, we are scared, but after the first shock we gradually adapt to the temperature and once we are done we feel amazing. With time and experience I became less judgmental and more understanding of myself. Being clear of my strengths and values gives me a sense of direction from which choices become easy. I learn to accept that I cannot do everything well, and I know what I choose to do is most important for me. With that comes a tremendous peace of mind; the fear of missing out and its close friend, regret, then slowly dissolve.

In my ongoing journey to understand myself better, I have gradually come to accept a paradox: I am enough, and I can be more. There is a fine difference between being critical of oneself and being judgmental. The latter is capitalizing on one's weaknesses; the former is focusing on the strengths and asking *"What have I done well, and how can I stretch myself to do even better?"* This shift in mindset is easier said than done because it involves letting go of a deep seated belief many of us have in perfectionism, which ironically is the very factor that limits our growth. It is far more productive to start something and evaluate over time rather than overanalysing about the best choice one can make, as Drucker assures us about decision-making: *"there are at best only "mostly right" and "almost wrong"."*

Contribute to learn. Learn to contribute.

The word "management" may have a bad rap. It is often associated with the idea of business management, which for many people conjure the image of heartless profit-driven corporations or micromanaging bosses. The concept of managing oneself as proposed by Peter Drucker goes much deeper than that: it is in essence the act of self-leadership, of continually refining one's vision, seeing the current reality more clearly and taking effective actions to move one in that direction. It implies a need for continuous learning.

My favorite phrase from *Managing Oneself* is *"focus on contribution"*. In general, students in schools do not ask themselves about their own contribution often enough. Some students adopt the mindset that they are in school to "take" rather than give because they pay for the educational service that the institutions deliver. It is the transactional way to view this relationship that often results in unrealistic expectations and lack of engagement from the student side.

What if students can shift their mindset from taking to giving by asking themselves a different set of questions: What am I contributing to the class? To the school? How can I make use of my strengths to make our school be a better place? Each student is a part that forms the whole environment of the educational institution, and we can take responsibility for our contribution. Why should students care? Focusing on contribution instead of on effort is empowering because forces one to think through the goals and results he needs to deliver to make a difference. Consequently he has to identify what specific skills he need to learn and set himself certain standards that will stretch him to develop further. "People in

general, and knowledge workers in particular, grow according to the demands they *make on themselves*", as Drucker observed.

Even more important than the skills one can ever learn in the limited formal years of education, this mindset will prepare young people for a productive life in our fast changing world for a simple fact: the knowledge workers cannot stop learning. *"Knowledge has to be improved, challenged and increased constantly, or it vanishes"*, to quote Drucker. He knows that successful careers are not planned but are the results of those who are *prepared* for the opportunities. These people understand the virtuous cycle where one takes up an opportunity, utilizes his strengths to deliver stellar results, which leads to even more interesting opportunities to develop. That cycle happens when one gets into the habit of asking and *acting* on these questions: What does the situation require? What can I with my strengths can offer? What results have to be achieved to make a difference?

For those who are still in school, there is a need to move beyond the identity from a student to that of a lifelong learner. One reason is that the world is changing so fast that one has to continually upgrade his own knowledge and skills in order to remain relevant, let alone valuable. One can view the world that way through the lenses of the survival of the fittest: if I am not doing anything valuable, someone else or a machine will replace my role soon. Drucker points out this challenge: *"Knowledge workers will have to learn to stay young and mentally alive during a fifty-year working life. They will have to learn how and when to change what they do, how they do it and when they do it"*.

But in more developed countries we are no longer living to survive. The commitment to learning thus reflects a fundamental understanding of who we are: a constantly evolving species with a deep-seated need to understand the world around us. Learning is how we thrive as individual, and learning best takes place when we can apply what we are learning on something relevant to us. Focusing on contribution makes us think through the context and thus encourages further learning because we know the purpose of what we are learning for.

Moreover, because we all live in society, we need to feel that we *matter*. By focusing on contribution, we can discover areas that offer us opportunities "for being a leader, for being respected, for being a success". By thinking about the second half of our life right now, an idea that may seem silly for a young person like me who has not even figured out the first half yet, we are forced to reflect critically on this question: What will still matter 20-30 years from now? It is an antidote to the short-term, quick-fix culture that maybe occasionally useful but more often avoids the real underlying issue and ends up creating more problems. The more time we spend thinking about it, the more we can start developing skills that truly matter to a global knowledge society.

Contribution to relationships

Focusing on contribution is also an important mindset when it comes to managing and developing relationships. First, thinking in terms of contribution instead of blame empowers us to take action when miscommunication happens. Most of us have experienced the frustration when the person we are communicating with simply "does not get it", whether she is our boss, subordinate, colleague or friend. Yet, that frustration

mostly occurs because of two assumptions: first, we know ourselves enough to express ourselves well and second, other people are *supposed* to understand us. Both can be mistaken. We know from Drucker that communication is first and foremost perception, which is influenced by one's background, intention and emotion. Thus, focusing on contribution in communication means to move past that assumption, to take responsibility to understand the other person first. We then have to start by learning to listen critically not only for the words but also for what is not being said, a skill not emphasized enough in the large part of the American culture, with its idealized image of the charismatic, eloquent and know-it-all leaders. It requires certain humility and courage to acknowledge and inquire into where we do not understand, but it is the only way we can hope to communicate.

Second, focusing on contribution shifts our focus from the individuals to the whole because we have to ask "How are we helping each other and therefore contributing to our relationship?" Thinking through and acting upon that question creates rapport because it reframes the distinction between "I" and "you" to "us". It therefore allows for effective communication and teamwork, both of which are becoming increasingly more and more important as the nature of work in our world has become more collaborative.

The phrase "focus on contribution" has become a personal mantra that reminds me of my intention whenever I interact with another person: "What can we learn from each other from this shared experience? Do we leave being any smarter, wiser and kinder?" It also helps me make better decision to spend time on what matters, avoiding the unnecessary gossiping or complaining sessions so prevalent in both online and offline discourse. Even those most of us know that the most meaningful and rewarding use of our time is when we share, learn and develop with others, we do not do it enough. Thinking about contribution emboldens us to share authentic experiences, the foundation for any long-lasting and meaningful human connection.

What does having this grand vision of ourselves mean in our day to day life? It is simple but not simplistic. One does not have to do big, life-changing and saving-the-world projects to make an impact and feel a sense of purpose. It is quite the contrary: it is the day to day consistent practice of contributing to everyone and everything we interact with that will add up. "*Effective leadership is not based on being clever; it is based primarily on being consistent.*", to quote Drucker. The realist and the idealist can and should co-exist within oneself, because it is precisely that tension between what is and what could be that keeps propelling us forward in the journey of becoming more for ourselves and for the world.