

Human Prosperity - A Cinder Block that can't be stolen

Information overload. Over 30 million articles on Google¹, prescribing us the steps to prosperity. Concise or detailed, focused on the financial or on the spiritual side, on relationships or career, infused with more substance or more noise, they all promise the key to unlock prosperity. Considering this amount of information, one would say that prosperity is only a stone's throw away. Yet most of the times, reality proves that an abundant usage of a term points to a deflation in meaning, to a shortage, even a crisis. After all, in times of war, peace is the most popular word. Conversely, less than one million posts refer to Peter Drucker². Once again, reality proves that geniuses are less known by their name, but more by their contributions.

Prosperity, derived from the Latin word "prosperitas" means "doing well"³. As with other abstract terms, like happiness or success, prosperity has a different meaning for each of us, depending - among others - on our cultural background, education and personal circumstances. Despite the various nuances however, its essence remains the same regardless of the context.

Prosperity and Business

A multifaceted term, prosperity comes in many forms. Human prosperity in its highest form is closely connected to every area in our life and lies at the intersection of work, community and self. Besides wealth - health, significance and civic wellbeing are also essential. This is equally valid for business and individuals.

Achieving true prosperity requires a governance shift. Businesses should focus more on two main prosperity triggers: sustainability and entrepreneurship.

Despite what is commonly assumed, the primary goal of a business should not be maximizing its profit, but achieving sustainable prosperity.

Prosperity without sustainability is a pure speculative exercise: a short term gain, quite unstable and conjectural. Drucker's visionary warning proves imperative and more truthful than ever: "Primum non nocere - first, do no harm". An enterprise can't flourish without considering the triple bottom line (financial, social and environmental factors), its ethics and long-term impacts on stakeholders. Which leads me to another conclusion: a business can't be prosperous per se, without considering the prosperity of its employees, local community, and the environment in which it operates.

Sustainability and financial markets are two areas in which I have gained some experience in the past five years. Before diving more into data-related aspects, I used to work as an ESG adviser supporting large institutional investors in the decision-making process. I was providing them with non-financial data regarding the sustainability performance of their investment portfolio. With sustainability gaining momentum, more and more investors are interested to know which companies are involved in environmental, social and governance (ESG) misconduct, are in breach of international sustainability standards (e.g. United Nations Global Compact) or are

1 30.400.000 Google hits for "steps to prosperity" as of July 14 2017;

2 925.000 Google hits for "Peter Drucker" as of July 14 2017;

3 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>; accessed July 14 2017;

deriving revenues from controversial products (sale or production of weapons, pesticides or abortifacients).

Following the growing concerns related to companies' impact on their various stakeholders (e.g. deforestation, carbon emission, employee health and safety, community conflicts, corruption, anti-competitive practices, life ethics), the investment community has rapidly reoriented towards integrating ESG aspects into investment analysis. Thus, financial prosperity is no longer a good indication of a company's value and certainly not enough for assessing its potential risks and opportunities. As a result, companies and managers can no longer ignore corporate responsibility and ethics if they care for the long-term prosperity of their businesses.

Entrepreneurship is the cornerstone of prosperity, while education is the cornerstone of entrepreneurship. In Romania, the communist legacy left a deep imprint on our parents' mentality who identified themselves with the proletarian workers, trying to fit the mold, live as discreet as possible, displaying low self-confidence, mistrust towards public institutions, risk adversity, hierarchical submission and a tendency to rather embrace scarcity than be prosperity-driven. While the communist effects have considerably worn off for younger generations, we still need to overcome this lag and create the propitious circumstances to enhance our entrepreneurship mindset, to embrace innovation, become adaptable, seize the opportunities and boost not only our own prosperity but also that of those around us.

Drucker's conclusion on the importance of entrepreneurial management for business prosperity has never proved more accurate. A manager should pose vision, act as forerunner - take the road less travelled or even carve a new one, advocate for change, take responsibility for it and carry it through despite challenges. Stephen Covey's "beginning with the end in mind" is one of the most powerful habits for an entrepreneur alongside with his ability to unleash the human potential latent in his partners. And here I couldn't agree more with the CEO of the Skoll Foundation who decisively concluded that "no resource is as vital to prosperity as that of human potential"⁴. Igniting this endless fire of human potential can undoubtedly shape the future of business.

An entrepreneur's motivation, unshakeable commitment and ambition to succeed are contagious, triggering the same in people around him. One would say that you can obtain the same results by simply reading a self-development book. But there's one more thing that distinguishes the entrepreneur: he has filled with results the gap between knowledge and action. Self-development books alone can only widen the knowledge - action gap. My favourite analogy is quite amusing, though nevertheless true: reading personal development books without taking action it's like using a fancy abdominal device to carve well-defined muscles instead of working out. Unleashing the human potential means much more than being a passive reader. Thus, how can this be achieved? And what are the barriers that stand in the way of our prosperity?

Prosperity and the Individual

Working for the same company that has grown from 20 Romanian employees five years ago to over 140 today, I have seen many people leave in search of a fresh challenge and others join the company with sheer enthusiasm and vitality. Thus, labelling the catalysts for prosperity as well as its roadblocks is more than just a theoretical exercise.

⁴ Osberg Sally, *How Social Entrepreneurs Unleash Human Potential*, Rotman Magazine Spring 2013;

Self-awareness (or the lack of it) plays an important role helping us discover our gift zone. I couldn't agree more with Drucker's advice on trying to channel all our energy into improving the areas in which we already excel, rather than investing into shifting from poor to average performance in another area. But labelling our gift area is not easy.

The parable of the talents⁵ clearly outlines the importance of putting our gifts to work. But how do we find our gifts? How do we find our strengths in order to leverage them? Along the years, I have met people stubbornly chasing tech jobs simply because these are in demand and pay the highest salaries. Capable and talented engineers pursuing management positions despite having no communication skills. Becoming a manager seems to be the next step in everybody's career, so rising through the ranks from a technical position to a management one has become the norm. But without passion and skills, I dare to say that it will not lead to authentic prosperity.

While, as Peter Drucker concluded, there is an increased demand for universal geniuses that can't be met, it is imperative to ensure that a company uses a robust and consistent appraisal framework and makes sure that it appoints true role models on managerial positions – not only with a sound knowledge, but also good communicators, with integrity, emotional intelligence, receptiveness. An inverted or imperfect scale of values can be a barrier both for individual and business prosperity.

Self-awareness is also essential in acknowledging limiting beliefs, removing glass ceilings and thus helping us tap into the spring of prosperity. Too much self-doubt or self-esteem can stand in the way to prosperity. For some of us “not good enough” is our default thinking; for others, it is “too good”. The standard against which we compare ourselves must be sound and building it requires introspection, emotional intelligence and a few good books followed by frequent self-upgrades.

There's a fine line between being incautious and being brave, between fruitful or futile effort. The goal is to spot that line using the magnifying glass of self-awareness. While self-awareness can be Achilles' heel, once fully mastered it guides us to prosperity in every area of our lives. Drucker couldn't have summarized this in a better way: “Knowing where one belongs makes ordinary people – hardworking, competent but mediocre otherwise – into outstanding performers”⁶.

As a manager, increasing the level of self-awareness of our teammates is a fine art. Sometimes managers tend to convince employees to take up challenges that do not match their abilities only because they have no alternatives. Or simply because they want to get the job done without considering their reports' lack of enthusiasm or skills. In his book “Leaders Eat Last”, Simon Sinek proposes a courageous approach: “Every single employee is someone's son or someone's daughter. Like a parent, a leader of a company is responsible for their precious lives”⁷. Does this mean that every time an employee shows disengagement with a certain task the manager should concede? No. It means that a manager should be sensitive to the areas where an employee excels and if after various attempts these cannot be expressed within the organization, it is the manager's responsibility to discuss with

⁵ *The Holy Bible, Matthew 25:14-30, New King James Version;*

⁶ *Drucker Peter F., Management Challenges for the 21st Century, Elsevier Ltd, 2007;*

⁷ Sinek Simon, *Leaders Eat Last*, Sinek Partners LLC, 2014;

the report and let him pursue his passion outside the company. By unselfishly encouraging him to make a change, a manager is fair with the company, with the employee and with himself.

Another important setback to prosperity is the lack of commitment. We take decisions too slowly and we change our mind too often and too quickly. We dream big but fail to follow-up the next day. We set the same goals every year but we rarely stick to them, as we are heavily influenced by the so called *present bias* (we overvalue short term gains at the expense of long-term payoffs). Strong performance becomes an outlier, not a habit. Without the lean thinking of continuous improvement and the drive to be more than average (because - as previously mentioned - we sometimes do not even realize we are average), we can't flourish. Unless you go the extra mile, your results will be comparable to others'. In this context, Winston Churchill conclusion is memorable: "Continuous effort – not strength or intelligence – is the key to unlocking our potential".⁸

It is the manager's role to set clear goals in alignment with the knowledge-worker's strengths and monitor them through completion, providing continuous feedback on the progress. Fostering a culture of excellence is the next step in maintaining a high level of commitment, as the authentic knowledge-worker has non-negotiable quality standards and is intrinsically motivated to deliver flawless outputs.

When I first read Peter Drucker's article on the knowledge-worker productivity, I realized that all the major factors he labeled as essential in determining productivity, describe me in the most accurate way: self-management, freedom to innovate, continuous learning, emphasis on quality, mobility and recognition. These metrics apply in my professional life but also in my private life. And this leads me to another barrier to prosperity: Failing to see the big picture.

People sometimes envision their work as a simple job that ensures survival and finances their after-work hobbies. This strong delimitation between work and personal life is deceptive. Life doesn't happen only after 5 p.m. I have noticed people who show no patience, fair play or consideration at work, but once at home they preach about kindness and teamwork on social media. I strongly believe that one can't flourish without being authentic and fully engaged - emotionally and mentally – regardless of the place or time of the day. Of course, engagement goes hand in hand with vulnerability. When you shut yourself down to the things you do not like about your work or your surrounding environment, you also shut yourself down to prosperity, happiness, creativity.

Personality matters and our perceptions shape our world. Unless you are computer, perception matters more than facts for you. Employees' lack of motivation to go the extra mile, to grow, to fully immerse in their work and deliver to the highest self-imposed standards is most of the time triggered by perceptions usually translated into "it's not fair to me". Thus, a manager must also excel in "hearing what isn't said"⁹, providing reinforcement, clearing unarticulated doubts or concerns. Peter Drucker clearly warned that "executives may become blind to everything that is perception rather than fact"¹⁰. People have different personalities and unlocking their potential requires different keys. Thus, similar to situational leadership, management scholars today should research management styles adapted to various personality types.

8 www.azquotes.com, accessed July 14 2017;

9 Williams Pat, Hussar Ken, [The Ultimate Handbook of Motivational Quotes for Coaches and Leaders](#), Coaches Choice, 2011;

10 Drucker F. Peter, [The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done](#), Harper Business, 2006;

Prosperity and the Self

I grew up in a family of modest income and my parents used to believe that only corrupt people could become wealthy. Which at that time, considering the post-communism governance weaknesses, was mostly true. We owned a house in a small city. I remember when I was around 6-7 years that my grandmother and I would wait till dusk when we would take the wheelbarrow and go a couple blocks away where there was a demolished building. We would take a few cinder blocks and then rush home hoping that nobody would spot us. For me that was exciting – I couldn't wait till evening when my grandmother and I would embark in this great adventure! Most of the pavement and the summer kitchen were built with materials collected from abandoned building sides. In his spare time, my father was the plumber, the electrician and the bricklayer.

By the age of 11, things started to get better as my father was promoted as a senior manager in a large company. Yet our mentality never changed. Being wealthier was weird, the source of innuendos and the trigger of trifling neighbor competitions on who can get more. Years later my father died. At the time, I was a college student but something was starting to change. I had started the self-awareness journey and as my values and my new thinking started to surface, I started to see prosperity in a new light.

I was not afraid of poverty, nor was I afraid to embrace wealth. I had no single doubt that I would not find my dream job and never worry about money. And that is exactly what happened. A few months before I was hired, I built a vision board where I marked the salary I aimed to gain in my first job. Coincidence or just the power of intention, but when I was offered my first job, I was proposed exactly the same amount. This was great but was just the beginning. In my case, prosperity meant much more. It meant significance, trust, wisdom – can I trigger an “aha” moment in somebody? Can I contribute to a higher purpose? Can I start again if I remain homeless, jobless or alone? Do I know myself enough? Am I free to choose, confident that I succeed and prepared to embrace success?

Unlike the cinder blocks I would collect with my grandmother, prosperity is the wealth that can't be corroded, stolen or lost. Deeply rooted within, prosperity manifest itself in various domains of our lives, from work to community and self. It's a sense of fulfillment, it's the mindset that helps us spot opportunities and the confidence to pursue them without standing in the way of others, but helping them to do the same. Prosperity is not about getting, it's about being, it's about giving.

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