Man in the Mirror:
How leaders can maintain humanity in a robot-driven society
By Angela Pham

Peter Drucker's leadership guidance is timeless, but even he couldn't have foretold how many world-shaping decisions would be the responsibility of people in their early 20s and 30s, building the future of society on MacBooks atop sunny Silicon Valley patios.

The thing to remember if you work in Big Tech is that no decision is small when you have billions of users. With scale, even subtle shifts are seen by many.

It is both a privilege and a burden: An honor to have your work seen by the masses. But a weight to belabor every choice. A source of pride to be with a renowned brand. Yet a source of anxiety when admiration turns to scrutiny. These blessings and burdens often confront employees ill-prepared for the levity of it all.

How can workers make moral decisions for products that scale so far? How can such young hands shape massively powerful algorithms with ethical leadership? And how can we not grow jaded over time, after so many millions of people blur into legions of users, controlled by machines that learn?

In a world in which tasks are commonly achieved via a smooth glass screen, from driving to paying to dating, we risk slipping into a moral gray area. It is on us young leaders to be effective executives, and to maintain morality no matter how slippery the circumstances in our robot-driven society. Here are the ways I've done it in my roles, and ways others can, too.

Don't lose sight of the individual experiences. As we build more things on the internet and on the blockchain, it's easy to forget our users when staring at a metrics dashboard and seeing people as merely dots on a growth chart. But we need a regular reminder of the people we service by getting out of our offices and watching people use our products. These shows us the stories that help us remember the people we impact with every decision.

Meeting users live means learning firsthand the technological realities of their day to day lives. For example, in India, during monsoon season, mobile service is spotty. When crops aren't thriving, you can't afford to buy more data. When you are wary of family judgment, you share rarely on social media. When you fear being harassed online, you will fear apps that ask for private information and photos. When you may never leave a village, your only connection to the world is the internet.

The reality is important because when the millions of your users come from such different places, your imagination can only go so far. This is similar to Drucker's story of automobile companies: They'd measured car safety only by the average number of accidents per passenger mile. But if they'd gone out and looked, they would have seen the need to also understand the severity of the accidents' injuries. So they missed the ability to create safer cars that made accidents less deadly. They missed the chance to see the realities of the individual experiences. And all it'd have taken was talking to the people.

Consider the stress cases early on. As we automate and robotize more and more in society, we need principled frameworks early on in every new technology exploration. Because when we work on technology that shape the future, we often are starting from scratch.

For example, the thousands of young people who work on Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa software didn't have a mainstream model from which to base all their novel decisions, such as: What questions would these virtual assistants treat as a joke, and which would they take seriously? Which gender would they go by? How would their responses differ between a request to dial 911, versus a request to talk to a suicide hotline?

Without a framework of guiding questions, it's tough to answer these individual situations one by one. In my role, I am often working on similarly new spaces that have compelled me to create a template of stress-case scenarios and questions. Much like a product brief, the stress-case template's questions should be answered before product development begins so that the technology is challenged early on. As Drucker

said, “One has to start out with what is right rather than what is acceptable.” To humanely shape our robotic future, we young leaders must lay down ethics now that set a principled precedent.

Here are some questions every tech builder should ask to maintain humanity in their products: How do we want the user to feel using this? If this were used with serious subject matter, how would that look? How might this sound or be misunderstood by a non-native English speaker, or someone with a disability? How will this make people’s lives better? If there’s an error, what happens? What could make this product break? How might an evildoer turn this into an evil product?

Voice concerns, loudly and persistently. In our robotic future, it is not enough to have a seat at the table; you also need a firm, loud voice at the table that isn’t afraid to hit Pause. Technology moves swiftly, and the demand for progress comes from on high. Little wonder Elon Must recently announced that his own projection of fully autonomous cars is now one year sooner than he thought. Who in his conference rooms would have the courage to speak up if something in those cars isn’t quite right or ready? Who risks being the lone voice of dissent in an atmosphere of excitement and awe? Reader, it should be you.

This dissent can take different forms. I’ve heard one leader reprimand, publicly and fiercely, a manager who interrupted a woman in a meeting. I’ve seen management interrupt e-mail threads to emphasize a team’s need to focus on the worst-case scenarios before we kept moving forward. And I’ve built entire decks to present to rooms of engineers on the need for us to be thoughtful and sensitive to our users’ different circumstances.

Without these voices of civility, humanity and morality inside powerful tech companies, we risk facing a future in which the precedents have already been set — we build, we test, we tweak, and we launch. But when algorithms increasingly control not just our internet lives, but our home lives, school lives, and work lives, too, it’s the voices of care and reason that must be heard, early and often, before the technology hurts more people than it helps.

Drucker wisely said that the more time we take out of the task of the legs — physical, manual work — the more will we have to spend on the work of the head. It is high time we use our heads.

Let people poke holes in your beliefs. At the same time that we boldly raise our voices, so too should we allow others to raise theirs. Allow others’ feedback to seep into your job and shape your product, even when it hurts.

For instance, the public backlash to Google’s Duplex technology was swift when the Google’s CEO proudly showed off technology that perfectly mimicked a human’s vocalizations over a phone conversation, misleading the other person. “Didn’t anyone tell them this would sound creepy?” one YouTube commenter asked. And perhaps many people had.

When weighing the pros and cons of progress against precaution, progress often wins. We need more tech leaders who not only listen to the pushback, but also let the pushback shape the product experience. Duplex could have debuted with more humanity, had the skeptics and cynics been able to poke holes into it: Could Duplex announce itself at the beginning of every call and interaction? Could Google openly share its overarching principles for ethical use of this technology? What would the company do if Duplex were used for ill intent?

In my job, we regularly share our ideas and work, and listen to and absorb critiques. Sometimes the feedback hurts, and sometimes I disagree with it, but in the end, the process is flexing our muscles to allow challenging perspectives that help guide our products in the future.

Likewise, in our robot-driven society, we need effective executives who invite and learn from skepticism, critique and condemnation when their technology is pushing the envelope. As Drucker has told us, “Unless has one considered alternatives, one has a closed mind.”

Look in the mirror. Drucker also implored leaders to think about what they saw when they looked in the mirror as they shaved or put on their lipstick in the morning—"Ethics requires that you ask yourself, What kind of person do I want to see in the mirror in the morning?" Is that the leader you want to be?

Sometimes when I stop in the bathroom at work, or am on my way to an event, I look at my reflection and summon these same questions. Did I spend my time today doing things that will help humanity? Did I consider people with care? Do I feel proud and kind when I look in the mirror in the morning?

I think that if people followed the guidance outlined above, they too would answer yes.

As Drucker has said, "We are not going to breed a new race of superman. We will have to run our organizations with men as they are." The least we can do is influence our next generation of executives to be conscious of their power, to use it for good, and to use guiding principles and frameworks that keep them moving forward with a conscience.

We often forget that the robot society is already here. As algorithms begin to drive more and more of our lives, holding on to our humanity is crucial. Because the robot society isn't, in fact, comprised of robots. The robot society is comprised of a few thousand people, making decisions that affect billions.

In fact, the bots that threaten to impede us most aren't long-armed, noisy humanoids. They are more often strings of algorithmic commands, the quiet hum of whirring servers, and the calm typing by a young programmer at their desk. Without guiding principles to lead us forward, our humanity is hopeless. And humanity is all we have.

Now, don't tell me you had a wonderful read. Tell me what you are going to do on Monday that's different.