

The Battlefield of the Mind: Overcoming with Drucker's Seven Experiences

A day after passing my viva voce, I found out that my external examiner had thought I was a man. There they were, those oddly affirming masculine pronouns dotting his pre-viva report on my doctoral thesis. The mistake was understandable, I thought, for someone who had only met me on paper and probably viewed my gender through the lens of my subject matter. For a few days after, I felt like an academic parvenu—this twenty-something, brown-skinned woman who had cranked a (manly) 257-page tome on Sri Lanka's military travails. Only months earlier at a military conference dinner in Copenhagen, flanked by Christian IV's tankettes and field canons at the Tøjhusmuseet, a gimlet-eyed Hungarian former army general had fired the salvo, "Why does a nice girl like you want to study military strategy?" I know I delivered some pithy spiel in response—but at the time, I was still learning to conquer self-doubt. Three years since, I have found that the process of studying an obscure war taught me all I needed to know about liberating my potential and prospering.

The Sri Lankan Civil War was one of those intractable conflicts. Spanning three decades, it brought State military forces head-to-head with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a rebel organization with a mandate to establish an independent state for Tamils in the Northern and Eastern territories of Sri Lanka. In May 2009, the three-year campaign known as *Eelam War IV* (2006-2009) culminated in the decisive victory of state troops, at a time when analysts worldwide predicted a stalemate. Three previous phases of armed combat—Eelam War I (1983-1987), Eelam War II (1990-1994) and Eelam War III (1995-2002)—had fallen short and it reinforced the notion that the 'Tigers' could strike at will and evade capture. So what explained the turn of affairs? This became a big question for me.

Like many seized with curiosity, I spurned the victor's narrative in pursuit of my own inquiry. To me, it did not make sense that the knowledge of war remained the sole purview of the military, especially in a conflict that easily claimed over 100,000 lives—including civilians. Yet, without frontline experience, what could I possibly contribute to the discussion? Others before me had asked the same question. Strategist Richard Betts was one of them. He concluded that

academics interested in studying the conduct of war were invariably subject to the following polar extremes: either they must accept that the matter of military affairs is a closed system where none outside the uniformed establishment can claim expertise or they are forced to correct the balance by developing the military science aspects of their work themselves, as autodidacts.ⁱ

It turned out that there was merit in a civilian's interest. As military historian Victor Davis Hanson argued, the knowledge of war and everything that it encompasses—in terms of the intervening influences of leadership, technological breakthrough, chance, national will and political change upon the prospects of victory and defeat—is necessary for democratic citizenship.ⁱⁱ

So I opted to build my knowledge of Eelam War IV from the ground-up. It meant sifting through 26,000 pages worth of digital news articles, military blogs, citizen journalism reports and commercial satellite imagery—all accessible alternative sources that collectively provided a window into combat. Charting through time, I developed a dataset of over 3,000 wartime events like aerial bombardments, skirmishes and bombings for the duration of the campaign. Tracking across space, I also geo-coordinated every event to explore the context and milieu in which it transpired. Fortunately, the era of open source meant I had a multitude of mapping tools with which to make sense of all this 'big data'. Using readily available Geographic Information Systems (GIS) like Google Earth, I utilized maps as a platform to document events, visualize changes over time and space and identify patterns in the unfolding of events.ⁱⁱⁱ

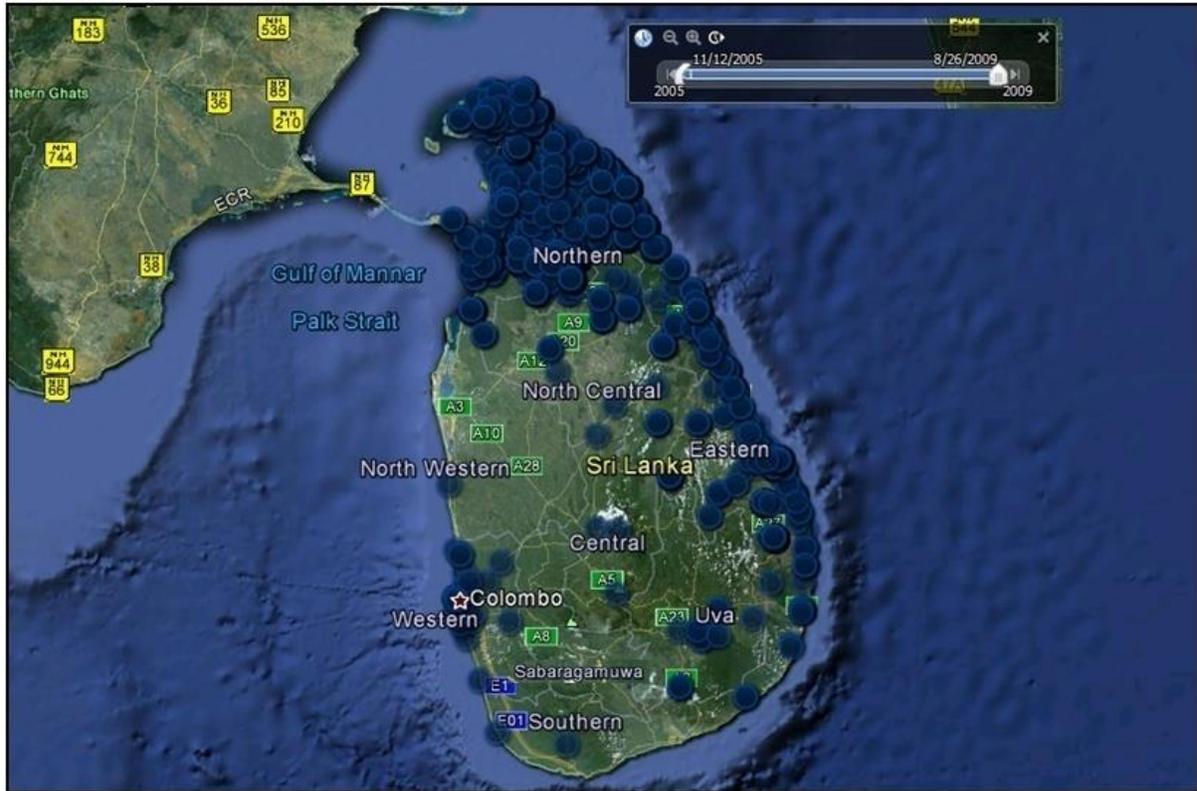


Figure: The geographical sites of 3,163 documented wartime events (November 2005-August 2009)

Looking back on those days as a doctoral candidate, prosperity in its fullest sense meant freedom—the opportunity and space to think, learn, believe and create freely. I felt the most prosperous when I saw ideas multiply before me and found myself most fulfilled when I was brave enough to give voice to those ideas. But this prosperity was also relative. In academia, I was surrounded by some of the finest minds; an embarrassment of intellectual riches. These were people whose words carried gravitas. Comparatively, I couldn't shake the fear that I was somehow grasping at straws. My battle with doubt was one that chipped away at any sense of prosperity I might have had at earning a merit-based doctoral scholarship.

In *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities and Practices*, Drucker asked a pivotal question about unlocking human potential: “How can the individual, especially the individual who is putting knowledge to work, become effective, and how can such a person remain effective over long periods of years, over periods of change, over years of work, and over years of living?” He

went on to narrate seven life experiences that taught him how to remain capable of growth and change in all circumstances.^{iv}

My time as a graduate student showed me that the obstacles that keep individuals from realizing their full potential are not so much the ones imposed by organizations and institutions. Rather, the greatest obstacles are the ones that play out in the battlefield of our minds. After earning my PhD at 25, I pivoted from an academic career into a corporate job at a boutique strategy consulting firm. Currently, I wear multiple hats within this firm. My business card bears the title of Consultant but I also work in virtual teams as a relationship manager for our offices in Boston, Massachusetts, and have recently accepted a position to lead a 12-person research and consulting team in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where I am physically based. With each new rung of the career ladder, one thing is steadily apparent: lasting prosperity is impossible unless an individual liberates their potential from imprisoning mindsets.

I encountered these mental roadblocks during my graduate studies and my path to overcoming them was circuitous at best. I did not know Drucker's seven life lessons back then but with the gift of hindsight, it is easy to see how they help address the very real battlefield of the mind. So, what are these imprisoning mindsets?

Mindset 1: The Tyranny of Constraints

I characterize this as the self-imposed and often, externally-reinforced idea that there are limits on an individual's success at an endeavour. Often, this mental roadblock is perpetuated by a lack of imagination. Early on in my studies, I had a particularly scathing project appraisal with an assistant professor in my department and was informed that the research I was attempting—tracking and mapping the temporal and spatial dynamics of wartime events—was far too ambitious for a graduate student of my capacity. In good faith, I was advised to scale down my scope to fit the more conventional mould of an International Relations PhD. At the time, this pronouncement was a bitter pill to swallow. In fact, I came very close to quitting. What stopped me in my tracks was recalling why I had embarked on this study in the first place. As an Abu-Dhabi-born Sri Lankan who had only known life in the Diaspora, my motivation was personal.

Ever the idealist, I had wanted to go back to my roots. I thought that if I examined Sri Lankan political and military history—so long neglected in my thinking—I would grow closer to navigating the thornier issues of personal identity and belonging. Looking back, that was the first of many times a larger vision would help me overcome the tyranny of constraints.

Overcoming Mindset 1: Goal and Vision

Drucker described this lesson as having the kind of goal or vision that Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi's *Falstaff* gave him. When an 18-year old Drucker first experienced this opera, he so marveled at its vitality that it surprised him to learn that *Falstaff* had been composed by an 80-year old! In turn, when Verdi was asked why he had undertaken the writing of such a demanding opera at an advanced age, he had expressed: "All my life as a musician, I have striven for perfection. It has always eluded me. I surely had an obligation to make one more try." Drucker described these words as his personal lodestar. In the same way, a singular vision is what drives an individual forward when constraints threaten to derail progress.

Mindset 2: Why Bother?

When laboring to channel hours of research into a 100,000 word thesis, it was hard to shake off the sinking feeling that no one would care for the discoveries that I had spent years collecting and nurturing into what I imagined were full-blown insights. I became well-acquainted with the sense of isolationism that builds up as you proceed through the long haul of any research endeavour, notwithstanding interactions with like-minded colleagues. Often, I spent hours agonizing over the wording of a single line of thought that I suspected someone else would surely skate past. Sometimes, this mental obstacle made it difficult to see a simple paragraph to completion. In those times, it took painful discipline to write to the fullest of my ability.

Overcoming Mindset 2: “The Gods Can See Them”

Drucker described this lesson through an anecdote about the Greek sculptor Phidias, who was commissioned around 440 BC to create the statues that stand on the roof of the Parthenon in Athens. The statues were universally admired, as Drucker described, but the city accountant of Athens had refused to pay Phidias when he submitted his bill. “These statues,” the accountant said, “stand on the roof of the temple, and on the highest hill in Athens. Nobody can see anything but their fronts. Yet, you have charged us for sculpturing them in the round, that is, for doing their backsides, which nobody can see.”

“You are wrong.” Phidias had retorted, “The gods can see them.”

Taking it a step further—when you are committed to excellence, it matters little who is watching.

Mindset 3: Thinking in Silos

Increasingly, knowledge work straddles disciplines and requires creative reach. Multidisciplinary works draw on the knowledge of different disciplines even as they maintain disciplinary boundaries while interdisciplinary works analyze and synthesize links between disciplines into a coherent whole. In solving complex research problems, it is siloed thinking that foils the plot. My thesis was rooted in Strategic Studies and informed by the traditions of Military History but utilized the methodology of Crisis Mapping for data capture and visualization. This intermingling of fields complicated matters—I never quite knew where one began and another ended—but I grew in my ability to approach research problems in multi-faceted ways.

Overcoming Mindset 3: Continuous Learning

In his time as a journalist, Drucker decided that he had to know about many subjects to be competent and so he forced himself into a system of methodical study. In the afternoons and evenings, he studied up on a series of subjects, from international relations to finance. Later, he went on to pick up a new subject every three or four years. Granted, it wasn’t enough time to *master* a subject but Drucker discovered that it was enough time to understand it *well*. Invariably,

continuous learning jolts a person out of siloed thinking and primes the mind to intuit new solutions.

Mindset 4: The Imposter Phenomenon

Perhaps the worst of the mental gridlocks is the imposter phenomenon. First articulated in the 1970s by psychologists Suzanne Imes and Pauline Rose Clance, the imposter phenomenon is said to occur among high-achieving individuals who are unable to internalize their achievements and accept the success that comes their way. Sometimes, it manifests in a tendency to attribute accomplishments to luck rather than ability and is accompanied by the fear of being uncovered as a fraud. Carole Lieberman, a Beverly Hills psychiatrist and author, pointed out that this phenomenon is likeliest when individuals are at an ‘in-between phase in their professional development, and asked to function in a capacity that they don’t feel ready to handle’.^v I still recall my first time presenting at an academic conference in Berlin and utterly freezing in the face of a question from the audience. Surrounded by accomplished academics, I couldn’t shake the feeling that my ideas were naïve and inconsequential. What eventually helped me was continuing on the path to knowledge for its own sake and taking regular stock of what I was accomplishing.

Overcoming Mindset 4: Reviewing

From his editor-in-chief, Drucker learned the value of reviewing personal performance. These sessions would start with a discussion of personal strengths and proceed to an evaluation of what an individual had tried to do well. Next, the editor-in-chief reviewed areas where the person had *not* tried hard enough. Finally, there was an extensive critique of failures. In the end, a person had to spend another two hours contemplating their program of work and learning for the next 6 months. Whether performed alone or with a mentor, the beauty of a process like this is that it pushes people to recognize their accomplishments while moving to address missteps.

Mindset 5: Fighting the Last War

Military historians often warn about the dangers of slavish adherence to how ‘the last war was fought’—some of the costliest mistakes stem from failing to anchor strategy and tactics to the battle at hand. In turn, students of military history are cautioned to adopt a reflective approach to

the study of war—one that is tempered by a sense of change. In any new endeavour however, it is easiest to operate from the comfort zone of past experience. When my cohort started their PhDs fresh out of undergraduate studies, we were encouraged to think of tenured academic staff as our intellectual peers and partners in research, in order to promote interaction and the cross-fertilization of ideas. Even so, it was not until a year into the program that I really began to shake off the ‘us versus them’ mindset left over from my days as an undergraduate.

Overcoming Mindset 5: What Is Necessary In a New Position

At the time of writing *Management*, Drucker had been a consultant for over 60 years and he described that failed promotion was the greatest waste of human resources in all the organizations he had witnessed. To combat this problem, he asked himself a simple question every time he embarked on a new venture, “What do I need to do now that I have a new assignment, to be effective?” Drucker discovered that every time, it was something different. Now, as I take up a new management role in the workplace, I ask myself the same question.

Mindset 6: Forgetting What Lies Behind

Despite the dangers of waging ‘the last war’, it is worse still when people and organizations do not learn from the past. P.K. Gautam, an Indian military analyst, has described how the absence of written records on the employment of air power by the Indian Air Forces in the insurgencies of the 1950s and 60s invariably led to a case of ‘counterinsurgency amnesia’ on the part of the national defense establishment—Indian forces simply had to learn the same lessons over and over on the battlefield.^{vi} Similarly, I learned that it was strangely easy to forget everything from the date of a battle to the entire conceptualization of a research problem. To keep my memory fresh, I filled up notebooks religiously; etching out thought processes, tracking daily progress and jotting down lessons learned.

Overcoming Mindset 6: Writing Down

Drucker learned the importance of writing things down from studying about Jesuit priests and Calvinist pastors. Whenever these religious men did anything of significance, they were expected to write about the results they anticipated and later, to contrast reality with these anticipations.

By and large, writing enables an effective review of personal performance and supports continuous learning.

Mindset 7: This Is All There Is!

It is terrifyingly easy to lapse into thinking that an important, consuming endeavour is the sole purpose of your life. There was a point when my thesis became so all-encompassing that I could not contemplate an existence beyond strategy and maps. I know that the same was true for my best friend, an Economics PhD, who saw regressions in her sleep. Personally, it took the onslaught of depression and the failure of all popular remedies for me to find faith in God and discover a deeper calling to support others in their spiritual journeys.

Overcoming Mindset 7: What to be remembered for

At the peak of his fame, Joseph Schumpeter disclosed to Drucker that he wanted to be remembered as having been the teacher who converted half a dozen brilliant students into first-rate economists. As he put it, “One does not make a difference unless it is a difference in the lives of people.” As Drucker learned, we grow into our potential when we realize our purpose on earth—whether social, emotional, intellectual or spiritual.

In the end, an important conclusion emerges from Drucker’s writing on the seven experiences. It is not the sole responsibility of organizations and institutions to free up human potential. Rather, the onus is on the individual to consider pivotal questions around their own trajectory and development. My university, a respected institution, provided me with the opportunity to earn an exceptional qualification. However, it was not until I grew in effectiveness that I was able to lay claim to prosperity. In this sense, true prosperity requires that individuals be free—to think, learn, believe and create. Freedom, in turn, requires workers of all stripes need to be cognizant of the battlefield of their minds and the many ways in which imprisoning mindsets can emerge in their journey. Now, as individuals take charge of their own minds, management can play a pivotal role by facilitating Drucker’s seven experiences; collectively driving human revitalization.

ⁱ Betts, Richard. (2001) ‘The Trouble with Strategy: Bridging Policy and Operations’ *Joint Force Quarterly*, Autumn/Winter Issue, pp.23- 30

ⁱⁱ Hanson, V.D. (2007) ‘Why Study War?’ *City Journal*

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ⁱⁱⁱ O’Connor, S. (2008) ‘Maps for advocacy: An Introduction to Geographical Mapping Techniques’ *Tactical Technology Collective*, September

^{iv} Drucker, P.F. (1999) ‘Revitalizing Oneself—Seven Personal Experiences’. In *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (Revised Edition), pp.505–513

^v Weir, Kirsten (2013) ‘Feel like a fraud?’ *American Psychological Association*, Downloaded from <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud.aspx>

^{vi} Gautam, P.K. (2011) ‘The Need for Renaissance of Military History and Strategic Studies in India’ *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Occasional Paper No. 21, p. 20