

# “The best way to predict your future is to create it” - Lessons for Today’s Leaders from the Creative Writing Process

*“I read a lot of history, biographies, science, and novels... I do not read management or economics.”<sup>1</sup>*

— Peter F. Drucker

Today’s world is powered by the most diverse workforce in history. Businesses, non-profit organizations and institutions of all shapes and sizes are experiencing dramatic change in the composition of their workforce – due to alterations in the economic landscape, technological advances, globalization, and – for the first time - members of five generations working, competing, learning and leading together. The very nature of our work has changed with the continuing rise of the “knowledge worker” – a trend first identified by Peter Drucker. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, knowledge now moves at the speed of light, and the challenges to the modern worker are historic.

In addition to posing challenges, these changing demographics present tremendous opportunities for today’s organizations, and companies that grab a hold of their diversity can do much more than simply “accept” or “embrace” it; they can actually *leverage* it as a competitive advantage.

To do so, today’s leaders must set aside old practices and *create* new ways to lead, and as Drucker discovered some of our most valuable lessons around creation of new realities can be derived from the arts.

Long before I became a leader at Microsoft and a volunteer leader in the nonprofit space, creative writing had always intrigued me – and its lessons continue to play into my leadership style. In this essay I will explore **the following** strikingly Drucker-esque leadership lessons, internalized through my toils in creative writing, and explain how these learnings can help today’s uniquely challenged leaders *create* the future, versus simply trying to *predict* it:

- Unlock potential through empowerment
- Move away from linear thinking in employee development
- Experiment, Experiment, Experiment
- Find your authentic voice

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<sup>1</sup> From an interview in the *Christian Science Monitor*, July 26, 1993

# LESSON 1: UNLOCK POTENTIAL THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

*"The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say "I." And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say "I." They don't think "I." They think "we"; they think "team." – Peter F. Drucker*

Today's leaders must move away from "I" and towards "we" and *empower* their diverse workforce to self-organize and own both their products and their careers. Without doing so, the opportunity brought along by diversity can be lost.

Creative writing holds some strong lessons in empowerment.

The idea of being able to create, from scratch, a glimpse into a world of your choosing and control every last detail that goes into it, every last thought of each character – even bringing in new characters on a whim, or eliminating others if they didn't quite fit the story – reeks of raw power and first attracted me to the creative writing process.

But upon diving – or "belly flopping" - into the process, I've realized that in any good novel the author is not the one who holds the true power at the end; for he or she has slowly given away that power, through each chapter, until at the end all that is left is the story and its reader. Or so it appears to the observer.

Leadership can be quite the same.

The best sign of good leadership is the success of the team or project *after* the leader has moved on. And, as we know, most good leaders are constantly moving to the next challenge.

The power of a leader lies not in how much he or she controls at any given time but how he or she empowers the workforce in order to get the most from it.

As Peter Drucker mentions "most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done". True management and leadership are quite the opposite. With a tremendously diverse workforce, harboring many different talents, ambitions and needs, true workforce empowerment is now more important than ever. Leaders must not fall into the trap creative writers sometimes do when they insert their ego into the story they are writing.

Traditional empowerment scenarios have focused on allowing employees to have larger spans of control and greater trust to experiment *within* their specific roles. In these evolving times this empowerment needs to stretch beyond role and allow employees to self-organize across verticals as well as to own their careers. The workforce is simply too diverse for leadership to dictate versus empower, without missing opportunities.

One inspiring example came from a colleague of mine, Ross Smith, who experimented with a new program he called "We-Org".

## Real example – Empowerment through “We-Org”

One of Ross’s biggest challenges as a leader at Microsoft was to keep his team of 80+ employees motivated and focused. Upon release of Microsoft Lync 2010, Ross was asked to re-org his team in order to best test the new product.

Ross had an extremely diverse team and understood that sometimes the best way to manage the complexities brought forth by this diversity was to not manage, but empower. He decided to do something that had never been done before – at least in his area – and actually allow the employees to re-org themselves. And so “We-Org” was born.

In this process the 80+ employees became “free-agents” in effect and could *choose* one of four teams to work for. The leaders of each team could not offer more money to the “free-agents” but could offer new development opportunities and different types of work.

Although this process took longer than a traditional “re-org” after the process was complete 95% of the staff said they “liked” or “somewhat liked” the new process. Even though each employee didn’t get their “ideal position” they felt empowered, and were glad to be a part of the process.

The idea of hiring a group of smart people and then empowering them to self-organize helped Ross get the most from a team that was very diverse generationally, skill-set wise and culturally.

## LESSON 2: MOVE AWAY FROM LINEAR THINKING IN EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT

*“Every enterprise is a learning and teaching institution. Training and development must be built into it on all levels—training and development that never stop.” – Peter F. Drucker*

Today’s leaders must move past treating all their employees the same, and basing development on where the employee fits on a linear track.

Building a complex, yet cohesive story, via nonlinear methods is at the heart of creative writing.

One of the first things I learned in beginning the creative writing process is that it is deceptively nonlinear. You can skip past writing “chapter 2” right away because you think of a great idea that transcends the current build up but makes more sense for “chapter 3”, you can be finishing up the last line of the book and then suddenly realize that you haven’t invested enough into introducing the characters to the reader in chapter 1.

Traditionally training investments, promotion strategies and general development programs follow very linear and predictable paths based on things like tenure, job function or title. This method can work when all employees are the same, but falls apart the more unique the individual’s needs are. Just by the very nature of being *predictable* these linear methods cause opportunities to be lost.

Moving away from this linear approach, in employee development is imperative in getting the most of a diverse, changing workforce. People are an organizations most valuable resource, per Drucker, and are nonlinear in nature - in order to maximize the return from your people, today's leaders must not treat them as such.

In fact, the practice of nonlinear management can be applied to everything from developing software products using agile methodologies (many tech companies do this in large capacities today) to manufacturing, and I argue that we should approach people development the same way.

So how can this be applied? It demands a new way of thinking.

Here are a **few example scenarios:**

- **Promotion and Advancement** - Managers should not promote simply based on tenure if they hope to maximize the potential of this diverse workforce. The pathway to "management" should not be a linear path from individual contributor – eg. 'After Darren has 10 years' experience as an engineer he is ready to be the engineering manager'.

Management requires a distinct skill-set and should be treated as such. As Peter Drucker pointed out "leadership is defined by results not attributes". Results not tenure are already beginning to hold higher weight in the promotion process, and per Drucker this must be embraced.

- **Learning** - Managers should not necessarily prevent employees from gaining experiences x, y and z *until only after* they have gained experiences a, b and c. For example, employees at lower levels with management aspirations should be allowed to learn about management and leadership (perhaps through shadowing or even job-swap programs), *while* learning about their current competencies instead of having to first master their current competencies before moving to the next.

This becomes particularly important in today's workplace where scenarios, such as the aforementioned "less experienced manager" occur.

- **Tailored Benefits and Career Development Programs** - To truly put the human at the center, managers must know the human. To authors that means the characters of the story and to managers that means their employees. Managers must not treat all employees the same in terms of opportunities provided and must tailor programs to life-stage, generation and other demographical attributes. This development and training should be perpetual throughout one's career and not stop once they have remained in role for an amount of years.

At the heart, linear methods impose order above creativity and don't account for the complex nature of today's diverse organizations and their development. This can still exist in pockets, but not as a strategy as it undermines the power of the employee. Moving away from this, doesn't imply abandoning all structure – structure is still very important – but the structure should be focused on empowering the employee to be successful not the leader to impose their will.

## Real Example – Nonlinear employee development through Reverse Mentoring

Reverse Mentoring is one good example of providing experiences to future and current leaders in a way that is nonlinear from a typical development standpoint.

It's based on the idea of placing folks new to the workforce, and of younger generations, with veteran members of the workforce with a goal of two-way learning or reverse learning versus learning being focused on the younger employee.

I have participated in a Reverse Mentorship, with my "mentee" Ross Smith over the last three years and it has been key to my retention and development, and has provided Ross with several lessons about managing his generationally diverse workforce. Ross is 49 and I am 29.

Neither of us would have gained this experience through traditional methods of teaching, training or mentorship.

The concept isn't brand new and has already been employed by several companies pioneering strategies for leveraging generational and life-stage differences.

Companies such as Procter and Gamble and Siemens, as examples, have set up tutoring for middle-aged executives, placing college-hires in the mentor role. The focus on the session was knowledge-transfer regarding tech skills. Despite the unorthodox nature of this approach, it has helped break down barriers in corporate interactions and has left both future leaders and current leaders with valuable experiences.

## LESSON 3: EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT

*"If you want something new, you have to stop doing something old" – Peter F. Drucker*

All creative writers are born through experimentation, and in the leadership of a diverse workforce, experimentation must also be held paramount.

According to Natalie Goldberg in her book "Writing Down the Bones: Freeing your Inner Writer" one of the key pillars of being a good writer is that you just get out there and write. Just write stuff. Experiment...

Write about what you had for lunch, write about your friend's new silver plated bracelet, and write about how you think your parents met.

This experimentation is crucial to the success of today's managers and is particularly important in these times of change.

In order to really be a good leader, you need to get out there and start leading. No, this doesn't mean all of sudden telling people what to do. This means experimenting with new leadership methods. This means getting creative. Each leader has their own method, and to find it you need to experiment.

As Drucker notes, organizations have a natural human tendency to cling to "yesterday's successes" rather than seeing when they are no longer useful. He discussed the need for planned abandonment of practice. Leaders cannot fall in love with ideas, methods, or philosophies to the point that they don't abandon what isn't working.

Abandoning what isn't working begins and ends with experimentation.

So how do we apply this? It's important to have some structure but not too much. Here are some examples, again applied at Microsoft by Ross Smith aimed at getting the most from his diverse workforce through experimentation.

### **Real Examples – Experimentation**

#### **Any hands meetings**

When a senior leader calls for an "all hands" meeting, the unwritten implication is that everyone should make sure they attend. Individuals may find it hard to assess the importance of the meeting, relative to their own priorities. A simple change, such as changing the title of an "all hands" meeting to an "any hands" meeting shifts the prioritization of attendance from the manager to the individual. Managers must convey the importance of a meeting versus rely on their authority to get attendance. The risk for the leader is that potentially they could be alone in a meeting room, as employees have prioritized other activities above the leader's meeting. While this can be an embarrassing situation for the leader, it can serve the organization well.

#### **Productivity games**

As the nature of the workforce shifts – with incoming "Gamer Generation" employees – and the rise of social gaming in older generations, leaders can make use of successful game mechanics to help motivate employees to participate in work-related activities. The principles of trust, collaborative play, and fun allow novices to experiment with new strategies with the freedom to fail in game play that might not exist in the traditional workplace. Risk-taking, supported by the structure of game mechanics, play, and organizational trust actually improves software quality by varying defect detection techniques.

Productivity games – games in the workplace – can help enhance traditional workplace methodologies including effective communication, employee engagement, cost savings, and more. Employees desire many of the same things from the workplace that gamers demand from games.

**Others strategies/tactics Ross's team has experimented with include:** "no meeting Thursdays", skip-level 1:1s, remote work, "facebook is fine" and individually defined working hours.

## LESSON 4: FIND YOUR AUTHENTIC VOICE

*“Your first and foremost job as a leader is to take charge of your own energy and then help to orchestrate the energy of those around you.” – Peter F. Drucker*

Today’s leaders must stop trying to be like other leaders, they must adopt their own style, just like an author must do. In doing this they must consider their voice as the sum of what they say and what they don’t say.

I learned very early in my experimentations in creative writing that finding your writing voice can be extremely difficult. Many authors write several books before really honing in on their authentic voice.

One thing I notice many do is write like they talk. When they put the pen to the pad they write down all the words they are thinking or would “say” to describe what they are trying to communicate as though they are describing a scene to someone standing next to them.

This sometimes causes authors to miss the beautiful opportunity the medium provides: to be able to create an authentic context and within that context build a story without trying to spell out all the details they can think of at that particular time based on how their talking voice (constrained by timing, pitch and volume) would communicate it.

To get past this writers must understand that their authentic writing voice is not limited to what it is they explicitly communicate or “say”; it is the sum of what they say and what they don’t say, the “white space” as Drucker refers to it.

This concept applies directly to managing today’s workforce and is now pivotally important with the breadth of tools currently available for leaders to deliver and hone their voice (e-mail, chat clients, tools like Yammer, Wikis, All Hands Meetings, 1:1’s, phone calls, etc.).

Corporate leaders must detach their “leadership voice” from their “managerial voice”, “their individual contributor voice” and voices of their peers and build a new voice that takes into account not just their communications, but the areas of absence.

### Conclusion

Peter Drucker’s impact on the discipline of management was the modern day equivalent of Shakespeare’s influence on writing. As we enter a new 21<sup>st</sup> century world of management, it’s critical that we build on his foundational principles (“standing on shoulders of giants” to quote Sir Isaac Newton) to adequately address and leverage the changes posed by today’s modern workforce. There are lessons for all of us in other domains – and Mr. Drucker was not only aware of this, but adept at picking them up and applying them for all of us.

It is clear that today’s work environments boast some of the most diverse, globalized constituencies in history. If leaders have an open ear, creative writing can provide tremendous lessons in not just managing this complexity but leveraging it through empowering our workforce, thinking nonlinearly in employee development, experimenting and finding our authentic leadership voice.

Let us all reach out to whatever domain necessary to create our futures, versus predict them. After all, as Peter Drucker notes “trying to predict the future is like trying to drive down a country road at night with no lights while looking out the back window.”

Thank you for reading!