

# **CHANGING MEANING OF PROSPERITY FOR THE KNOWLEDGE WORKER: LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS OF THE ANNA KARENINA PRINCIPLE**

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## **ANNA KARENINA PRINCIPLE: AN INSIGHT INTO MODERN MANAGEMENT**

Consider a worker in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The opportunities presented to them in form of jobs were far less than those which are served to a 21<sup>st</sup> century worker. In this ever changing global workplace, it would be ideal if we remember the words of one of the greatest writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tolstoy, who begins his iconic work *Anna Karenina* by the following lines,

*“All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”*<sup>[1]</sup>

These lines spoken in the context of marriage mean that the success of a marriage is not dependent on a single factor; rather a combination of numerous factors on whom the marriage is dependent. Each factor is equally important, and the marriage is in doldrums if all the factors don't fall into place.

The same analogy can be applied to the modern management scenario. One of the best works regarding the principle is Bob Behn's report stating the importance of Anna Karenina to public managers. <sup>[2]</sup> Coming back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge worker, the meaning of prosperity is very often dependent on factors beyond the control of the leaders. Workers often have a new 'factor' to harp on. This brings to the questions, “Can we realise prosperity of humans if we control these factors?”, “Does the key to unhappiness lie in elements which are controllable?”, “Does technology help us in any way in this regard?” “Or is it an impediment to the modern worker which the worker hopes he/she would be better off without?” I try to answer some of these questions by singling out the factors which the 21<sup>st</sup> century managers need to address.

## **TO EACH HIS OWN: Defining Motivation And Potential**

The modern manager as well as the modern worker is beginning to realise the value of human potential and motivation as a source of value to the organisation. We try to characterise prosperity on the basis of materialistic needs; a well-paying job, a good house, other benefits. An overlooked aspect of the well being of a human is his ability of using his potential to the zenith. My grandfather in the 20<sup>th</sup> century often used to save his salary to invest on buying land because people then, thought, investments must be on tangible resources rather than intangible human knowledge and potential. To explore the concept of human potential, managers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have started looking at factors other than those covered by the company.

The glaring question of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is: Does achieving less than their potential cause unhappiness to someone and those around him? We examine this question through the example of the frustrated gamer. We observe that while playing online games, if a player goes on to lose a lot of games, i.e. embarks on a losing streak, the actual reason may have been a better competitor up front or just a bad day at the office for our player, but the player

potentially tries to blame several other external ingredients like a bad internet connection or a lack of teamwork. In my context, whenever I have a poor run of scores in exams, I try to shift the blame and get agitated when someone points out that, “Hey, the flaw lies with you.”

This is exactly the kind of situation the management ought to avoid. A direct confrontation with someone who is at a low may see vile tempers flowing around which upsets the workplace culture, which must be protected like the sanctum sanctorum. A potential solution in this case lies in what I call the ‘Maths Problem’ solution. In my case, I used to be upset when I couldn’t do some problems correctly. What my mother did to raise my spirits forms the solution. She used to pick a sum which used to be far easier than the ones I was taking a crack at knowing that a string of easy problems can give me what was crucial at that point of time, “confidence”. In a management scenario, when a co-worker is playing below his potential, the manager needs to give him some time while easing off the work burden a little. Like a little sleep does our body a world of good, a little time-off is rejuvenating. Though in accordance with Drucker’s view of keeping management as humane as possible, maintaining motivation is a process which is best summed up as a trial-by-fire.

### **MIRRORING THE RUBIK’S CUBE: Changing Face of Organisations and Challenges for the Worker**

Outsourcing of jobs has been a regular feature of multinational organisations since the dawn of the 90’s. Organisation culture has changed in a way that an organisation is increasingly hiring from different regions of the globe.

The changing face of organisations across the world reminds of the Rubik’s cube I used to solve during my childhood. Whenever I set out to solve it, the initial combination was never the same. I see the same across organisations. The co-workers keep changing as organisations try to present an inclusive, tolerant image of themselves. This diverse structure lends each organisation a unique framework and work environment. As an average worker enters into a new workplace, he tries to assimilate the various cultures across the workplace. I feel that the key to be happy, which is the aim of human prosperity for me, apart from the allure of a new workplace and exciting perks of the job is the attitude towards adaptability. When as a child the Rubik’s cube presented a new challenge to me each time, I was besought with solving it, and better each time. Drucker’s knowledge worker is challenged with changing workplace strata, and with belief I vouch for an approach to look at problems objectively and set about new challenges and objectives each time with vigour and renewed confidence.

Perhaps a thing or two about workplace relationships can be learnt from the Danish practice of *Hygge*.<sup>[3]</sup> An approximate translation into English means its the equivalent of *hug*. How can *Hygge*, a Danish concept be applied to the modern workplace where technology is the buzzword? The Danes have to spend a considerable amount of time in the comfort of their homes because of incredibly long and harsh winters. Spending considerable amount of time in the comfort of their homes with friends and family allows comfortable meals and rekindles relationships.

A greater credit of acknowledging *Hygge* must be because Danes are considered the happiest people in the world and replicating this practice in a management scenario in maintaining happiness involves activities where more and more people feel they are a part of the family, where accolades are cheered and grievances are heard.

## **NOT A MIRACLE WORKER : Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Leadership is often thought of as a job a maverick can only pull off, people with charisma who can magically influence people and inspire insipid members of the organisation to fall in line and achieve managerial growth targets. Often Peter Drucker has emphasised the concept of an effective leader over a maverick leader. To quote Drucker, “*Charismatic leadership by itself certainly is greatly overstated. Look, one of the most effective American presidents of the last 100 years was **Harry Truman**. He didn’t have an ounce of charisma.*”<sup>[4]</sup>

All the people I have dealt with in my life in an organisational setup can be classified as **initiators and executors**. Extending Drucker’s philosophy on effective leadership in which he focussed on finding people who are more effective and adept at executing certain tasks, I can say that initiators are people credited with beginning a nouveau process. They are not to be confused with “idea-people”, the type of people who formulate all kinds of ideas but do not put even one foot on the treadmill. Initiators often commit the mistake of stuffing themselves with way too many tasks that they can handle. This is where the work of the executor comes in. The executor, in my words, is effective at handling certain types of works. Similar to the concept of the Drucker’s knowledge worker, the executor is well versed with the given job he/she is tasked with executing.

Contrary to the perception that the leadership must always formulate ideas, I believe that each and every organisation must have a robust feedback mechanism. Let’s call it the ‘*doctor-patient*’ approach. If a doctor goes on prescribing medicines to a patient without listening to what the patient has to say about his recovery, chances are that the diagnosis is not full-proof. Good leaders keep their ears to the ground to know about the prevailing workplace situations. Major crises are averted and there are lesser chances of discontent if the management keeps a tab on the feedback and grievances of these executors. Drucker also advocated that in a 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation, leaders must have an ‘open-door’ policy. But he also emphasised that priority of the organisation must not be sacrificed in trying to please everyone. As Herbert Bayard Swope once said<sup>[5]</sup>,

*“I can’t give you a sure-fire formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure: try to please everybody all the time.”*

### **The Case Of The Interesting Leader: How leaders make jobs exciting**

In all of humanity’s existence, there has never been a consensus on how an effective leader should be. Most attempts to pin down a particular image of a leader hasn’t been successful. In addition to Drucker’s philosophy of the effective leader, I would like to add the concept of the “interesting leader”.

To see this case of an interesting leader, we go all the way back to 2008 when the inaugural edition of the Indian Premier League in cricket started. The lesser favoured Rajasthan Royals won the inaugural edition. I read it somewhere about how their captain used to motivate them, they answered that the captain always used to make the game interesting by setting personal targets for each and every player. It meant that in addition to the collective goal of winning the match, each player had an agenda of his own.

Applying this concept to management sounds like a step in the right direction. Drucker emphasised that, “people who, typically in their 40s, hit a midlife crisis when they realize that they won’t make it to the top or discover that they are not yet first-rate.” He suggested managers to give them a parallel, not necessarily a profit-driven challenge to rejuvenate them and give them a sense of achievement. This makes them more productive in the long run and prevents a burnout.

### **TECHNOLOGY: Not Disruptive If Explored**

Another factor to be evaluated, as part of the Anna Karenina principle, is the extent to which technology, especially automation and AI, are going to affect jobs in the future, and in turn prosperity. Reid Hoffman knows more about automation and Artificial Intelligence than any average person. Hoffman has been a great supporter of using AI as a tool for increasing efficiency in the workplace. He feels that AI helps in scheduling and organising.<sup>[6]</sup> By bestowing the responsibility of scheduling upon the AI, he feels that navigating internal processes and processing through files have become hassle free. Technically, the efficiency has improved and AI has relieved other employees of tiresome tasks, there is an increasing itch to question the extent to which AI do control us.

As the debate around automation refuses to cease and with no clear headway in sight, let’s evaluate the type of effect automation may have on jobs. It’s quite comprehensible that in the immediate future, menial jobs will be taken over by robots. This will also affect outsourcing of jobs because the outsourced jobs will be taken over by robots, provided the cost of labour remains lower than earlier.<sup>[7]</sup> Jobs facing immediate threat are those which required more hands, and in turn increased labour costs.

But this is merely a part of a process of change, similar to the one humanity experienced at the time of the Industrial Revolution. At that time, most of the workforce was engaged in farms. The nature of jobs changed and most of the workforce started to work in industries leading to agricultural workers being replaced by machines. The key to this change is *adaptability*.

Long gone are the days when a person was expected to perform a single task only. Multitasking effectively forms an important part of the workplace and multitasking with AI will be critical to workplace prosperity in the near future. So instead of whining about automation stealing jobs, employees of the organisation must be educated to effectively multitask and use the situation to their own advantage. It increases their indispensability to the organisation.

Presently, an equivalent transition is going to take place in which humans are going to take up more complex tasks which involve higher cognitive skills. As Andrew Ng, director of the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory near Palo Alto, California, opines, “There will always be work for people who can synthesize information, think critically, and be flexible in how they act in different situations. Still the jobs of yesterday won’t be the same as the jobs of tomorrow.”<sup>[8]</sup> The essence of Drucker’s teachings lives on in the sense that knowledge workers as predicted by him will remain employable as ever. This though requires a greater level of schooling so that knowledge remains a competent alternative to technology. Carl Benedict Frey aptly summarised the competition saying, “*It’s a race between technology and education.*”

Drucker's philosophy on *managing oneself*<sup>[9]</sup> must also be noted here. Drucker emphasised the learning of new skills to keep oneself from becoming obscure and be productive for a long period of time. Leaders and managers have become more than just supervisors in a way that they ensure the workers maintain the sanctity of the workplace. Education has established itself as the cornerstone of prosperity in the workplace as technology takes the centre stage in this era of automation. Although technology may seem as a dystopian catalyst to the average worker facing job threat, the fact remains that technology is here to stay. To lead a life of prosperity and have happiness, we must embrace technology instead of treating it with skepticism. Drucker's concept of the knowledge worker has become more pertinent than ever before.

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