

Inclusive Leadership - The Outcome of a Relentless Feminist Experiment

Proem: *Drucker & Socrates enabled me to make sense of my mother's comprehensive leadership style, by helping me establish a fascinating link between culture and leadership, through an involved conceptualisation of identity, and critical thinking.*

Many years ago, when Drucker was asked *who the greatest leader in America was*, his reply was – “*Frances Hesselbein*”, the CEO of the American Girls Scout Movement. When rebutted about the fact that Girls Scout is an NGO, he retorted by saying that – “*Frances Hesselbein could manage any company in America*” (Carroll, 2010). Today, at 104, she is the president and CEO of Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute (formerly known as the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Non-profit Management).

At the age of eight, Frances used to spend a lot of time with her grandmother, near Johnstown, Pennsylvania, deep in the heart of the coal-mining country. Her grandmother had a music room in her house with an “arching ceiling, stained-glass windows, and a pipe organ”. On top of the shelf, two baroque Chinese vases were perched which little Frances was never allowed to play with. One day, Frances' grandmother sat her down and told the story of these vases - Many years earlier, Mr. Yee, the local laundryman came to visit her with tears in his eyes. He was holding the two vases and expressed his desire for the grandmother to have them. He was returning to China to reunite with his family. She was quite pleasantly surprised and asked – “Why me?” Mr. Yee had replied – “In the ten years I've lived in this town, you were the only one who ever addressed me as ‘Mr. Yee’.” (Diversity Woman, n.d.)

Frances describes this as a defining moment of her life, which taught her the importance of dignity and inclusion, and determined her value-driven leadership style. Seventy-five years later in 1998, she was honoured with America's most prestigious civilian award, the *Presidential Medal of Freedom*.

The title of this essay has been inspired from a 1994 Wall Street Journal article titled “*Drucker on Management – The Continuing Feminist Experiment*”. In this seminal work, Drucker anticipated an absolute subversion of older paradigms, as sex roles disappear in an increasingly knowledge work-oriented society. Twenty-six years later, we realise that Drucker couldn't have been more right. The glass ceilings are being shattered as women compete with men in all walks of life.

Drucker evoked the motif of a glass ceiling in 1969 in one of the psychology papers he presented to the Fellows of the International Academy of Management in Tokyo. The paper talks about the *Drucker's Challenge*, which states that – “At its most powerful, communication brings about conversion, that is, a change of personality, values, beliefs, aspirations. But this is a rare existential event, and one against which the basic psychological forces of every human being are strongly organised” (John Cunningham Wood, 2005). He postulated that every human has an *emotional glass ceiling*, which is an innate resistance to transforming identity. The Drucker's Challenge and the emotional glass ceiling, form cornerstones of this essay.

The journey of a woman from a housemaker to a knowledge worker in the modern epoch has shaped the three elements of her identity – emotions, intellect, and values, and this endeavour

has rendered her extremely capable to annihilate the germane glass ceiling, thereby emerging as an *effective leader*.

In an interview on leadership strategy, Frances said - “Our contribution to furthering the mission is enhanced by our gender – male or female – any effective leader brings his or her life experience and point of view to bear” (Hesselbein 2013). This thinking manifested in her leadership when she was at the helm of the Scouts. She weaved the enduring insights of Drucker with the values of diversity and inclusion imbibed by her from her grandmother, be it the belief in Drucker’s aphorism of short powerful mission statement when she created a gripping statement for the Girls Scout – “To help each girl reach her highest potential”, or the introduction of four new Scout handbooks to capture the different culture identities of the members as she felt it was important for any young girl to find herself in the handbook. The results of her direction and efforts are evident in the fact that when she retired in 1990, the organisation not only recorded the highest membership numbers in the history but a three times larger minority membership compared to the start of her tenure.

The story of Hesselbein demonstrates the importance of a value-based leadership style. In the absence of such an anchor, the values can be overridden by emotional reactivity and rationalised by the intellect. Hence, as stated by Drucker, for a leader to be consistent in her words, and action, the balance between the values, emotions, and intellect is imperative. Emotions are one of the most vital aspects of the identity as they mould the thinking and the logic, and hence augmenting the emotional intelligence in leaders is the crux of the Drucker’s Challenge.

The anthropological concept of identity has developed over time and enriched through research on interethnic relationships, ethnic borders, and ethnicity (Grimson, 2010). Concerning the construction of identity, it’s worthwhile to note Ruth Benedict’s words – “No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking.” These definite set of customs and institutions can broadly be encapsulated as '*culture*' which is one of the primary drivers for one’s conditioning. It informs one’s opinions, and approaches and thereby shapes one’s identity, ultimately affecting their leadership style. Parker findings also reveal that cultural background heavily influences leadership style (Parker, 1976). Hence, it’s prudent to view leadership in the light of cultural consequences especially when using the lens of identity-focused Drucker’s Challenge.

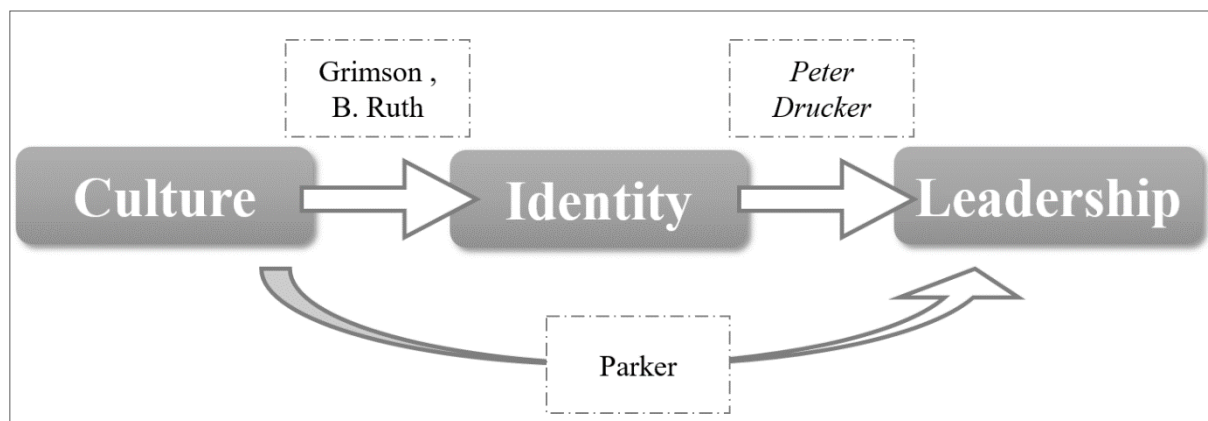


Fig 1: Relationship between Culture, Identity & Leadership

In the late eighteenth century, Hegel introduced the concept of “the other” as the “constituent part of self-consciousness, which complements the propositions about self-awareness” (The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 1967). Over time, this concept has been applied to numerous cases – from the requirement of the cultural subordination of the non-whites for transformation into the subaltern native, by the colonialists, to the representation of women in a patriarchal male-dominated society. These ‘others’ have faced prejudice and discrimination at the hands of the ‘same’ over centuries. Years of revolutions, struggles, and movements have aimed to assimilate these into a unified self. However, the culture of othering has left the others (*minorities*) with indelible imprints and lessons. These lessons form an important aspect of their identity and hence their leadership style. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that minorities tend to adopt a nurturing, inclusive, and an empathetic leadership style that falls under the ambit of “transformation leadership” (Ardichvili A, 2009).

The Harvard Business Review article – “Leadership in Your Midst: Tapping the Hidden Strengths of Minority Executives”, talks about the hidden leadership talent of the minority professionals who cultivate it immensely through their “*off-the-job*” involvement in community outreach and volunteering efforts. It presents some quite insightful statistics - Among highly educated African-American female professionals, 25% are active leaders in their religious communities (compared with 16% of white men), and 41% are involved in social outreach activities (compared with 32% of white men). Most frequently, they volunteer in schools, hospitals, libraries, shelters, and other organizations in their communities. Minority women are also on the front lines helping young people in their communities as mentors, tutors, and “big sisters”.

These accounts are characterized through a strong undercurrent of resilience. Although there have been variations in the definition of the term resilience, the most widely accepted interpretation by Luthar, views it as a construct with two dimensions – significant adversity and positive adaption. The evidence of resilience is manifested as the degree of these two dimensions (Luthar, 2006). This dual-dimension exposition of resilience strongly justifies its relation with leadership when viewed in the backdrop of the Drucker's Challenge. Overcoming the resistance to alter emotions, and thereby the identity is the crux of the challenge, and the competence to achieve this is directly linked to the power of adaptation, which defines the resilience of an individual (in addition to the adversity). Hence the act of othering breeds a culture of adversity that manifests as resilience, thereby strengthening one’s leadership potential.

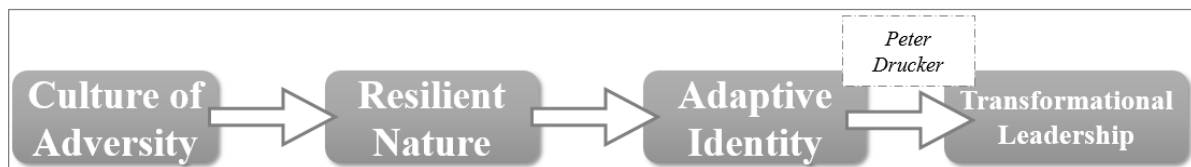


Fig 2: How a culture of adversity cultivates transformational leadership

Hesselbein’s rise from a volunteer troop leader to CEO coincides with the rise of the second wave of feminism, a movement associated with a plethora of legal victories such as Equal Pays Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legitimising equal employment opportunities, or the landmark Griswold v. Connecticut Supreme court ruling of 1965 allowing private access to contraception. The women organised themselves, fought and won many battles on numerous fronts – sexuality, family, the workplace, universal suffrage, reproductive rights, and legal inequalities. Hesselbein, being the CEO of the Girls Scouts of

the USA, played her own small, albeit a significant part of this movement. Dissecting any other movement across countries and centuries, one finds similar patterns of prejudice and resilience, and the emergence of empathetic leaders who use lessons from their past to herald an inclusive and a transformational future.

Identity forms the nucleus of the Drucker’s Challenge. While communication forms a key element in breaking the emotional glass ceiling and unlocking one’s leadership potential, it is one’s own reflections of those communications and interactions which enables her to transform. This ability to process, reflect and synthesis is intrinsically linked to one’s *critical thinking* ability.

The earliest known account of critical thinking can be found in Socrates’ teaching to Plato. These include a part of Plato’s early dialogues where he and others are posed a hypothetical question by Socrates – Is it right for him to escape prison? The philosophers after reflecting on the question deemed it incorrect as it violates the laws of Athens. Socrates dismissed this argument by saying that one cannot depend on authority to have “sound knowledge & insight” (Visser and Visser 2019). This innocuous line underscores the importance of critical thinking in leaders (ones with the authority), as for many, they are the de-facto voice of reason.

Socrates argued that a good life comes from critically questioning everything around, or what he called an ‘*interrogative soul*’. (Stanlick and Strawser 2015) His method of seeking evidence and eventually tracing implications is termed as the *Socratic questioning*. It forms the essence of his style of critical thinking which aims to “reflectively question common beliefs and explanations, carefully distinguishing beliefs that are reasonable and *logical* from those that—however appealing to our *native egocentrism*, however much they serve our *vested interests*, however comfortable or comforting they may be—lack adequate evidence or rational foundation to warrant *belief*” (Visser and Visser 2019)

A careful analysis of Socrates’ critical thinking model and Drucker’s conceptualisation of identity, admits an almost bijective mapping between the two paradigms. The intellect of Drucker’s identity corresponds to logic and a rational foundation; emotions harmonize with the native egocentrism and the vested interests; finally, the values embedded in the identity map to one’s beliefs. Hence, the pursuit of the elusive balance between the intellect, emotions, and values, lies in the cultivation of a critical thinking temperament. Consequently, a leadership style that is informed and guided by critical thinking prepares one to recognise and face the Drucker’s Challenge in a meaningful and powerful way.

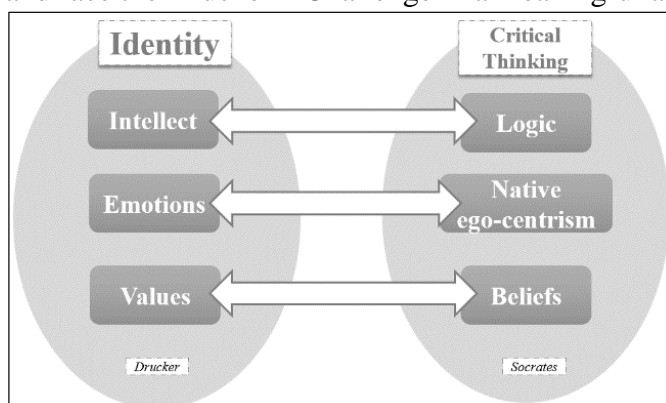


Fig 3: Bijection (2-sided) between Drucker’s identity & Socrates ‘Critical thinking

This established link between critical thinking, identity, and leadership should be analysed under the wider ambit of culture, discussed earlier. Critical thinking shapes, and is shaped by identity. Hence the role of culture in the construction of identity, implies a cogent relationship between culture and leadership potential, through the critical thinking faculty.

Amartya Sen, in his book – “The Argumentative Indian”, talks about how some of the most powerful arguments in the Indian history, have their genesis in the “least privileged groups”. Taking a thriving argumentative tradition as a proxy of a well-cultivated critical thinking, serves as a more direct corroboration of this relationship.

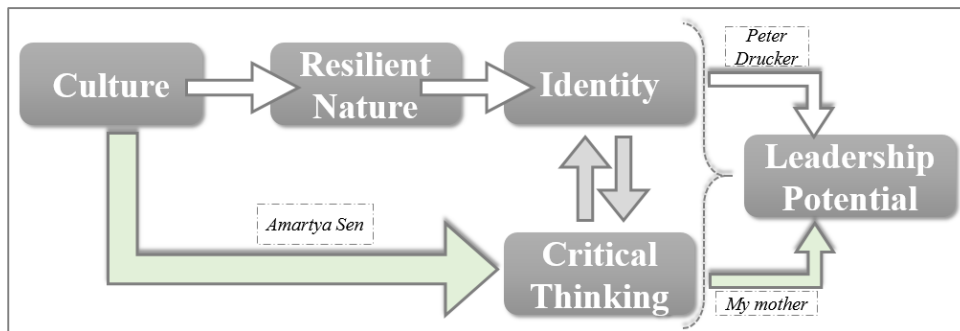


Fig 4: The pathway of cultural influence on leadership potential through critical thinking

Drucker & Socrates, have established a sound foundation of this framework. I would now like to talk about my mother, for establishing the last direct link and as a riveting application of this system.

Uncertain times demand critical leadership. The global Coronavirus catastrophe serves as a compelling example. While right and timely decisions can save many lives, wrong ones can spell doom for countless. My mother, who heads the pathology department of a 350+ bedded private hospital on the outskirts of Delhi, is playing a special role in this fight against the virus.

She had undertaken this role three years ago when my younger brother entered a university. Prior, to that, she was working on a part-time basis. This arrangement was to facilitate a schedule where she could be at home by the time we were back from our school and help us with our studies and other things. Her sacrifice was truly transformational for us, as we not only excelled on various fronts in school, managed to secure admissions to our dream universities, but more importantly internalised many values which we otherwise would have imbibed after having our share of failures in life.

In the recent times, her lab has turned into a battlefield where she is responsible for the safety of her staff and the accurate reporting of the hundreds of tests coming to the lab every day. Her approach has drawn appreciation from not only the hospital leadership but also the local administration, which has emulated her practices in many of the neighbouring government hospitals.

Since February of this year, she had anticipated the onslaught of the virus and had recognised many of the new challenges it was going to throw in the lab’s way. She was prudent enough to get in touch with all the past and the current vendors of the lab and order PPEs, testing vials, and other equipment available at that time. As the number of cases began to soar in the country and the state, she realised that one of the major bottle-necks in the fight against COVID-19 was going to be the absolute scarcity of testing kits and hospital resources, and

undertook steps to implement hyper-frugality while balancing accuracy and safety. In March, there was a district directive that every sample to be tested should be sent to a central government hospital, in addition to the in-house testing, to ensure the veracity of the tests. This duplication of testing would have resulted in twice the rate of exhaustion of the testing kits leading to severe shortage against the burgeoning number of received samples. Upon learning about the directive from the superintendent, she called up the District Magistrate (DM) herself and tried to explain the unfavourable trade-off between a marginal increase in accuracy (if any) against the lower testing capacity. Such a call, from my mother was quite unprecedented as it usually the branch heads or the CEO who interfaces with the local government, whenever required. However, the alarm raised by her turned to be a straight from horse's mouth-kind of intimation for the DM, as the order was rescinded at once. Complying by the directive would have been the comfortable thing for her, as reaching out to the DM directly, entailed a risk of antagonising the hospital leadership, at a time when layoffs and salary cuts were rampant. However, she exhibited a value-driven leadership where she remained honest to her duty of fighting the virus - spread, without succumbing to her emotions or any intellectual counter-rationalisation.

Mother has designed a detailed policy regarding the testing procedure to be followed by the healthcare workers in her lab, spanning, the donning of PPE, to the naming convention of the sample vials. She has followed this drafting exercise with a thorough implementation plan and a rigorous review process where she solicits feedback from clinical departments like cardiac care to import the best practices from the operation theatres.

As she comes home after a long day at work, and discusses with us, what happened at the hospital, I find myself surprised at her style of working. While Drucker said that effectiveness can be learned, I don't understand who taught her effectiveness, so effectively? For a better part of her career, she has juggled between household and professional commitments, the latter being primarily focussed on examination and reporting of slides, with an almost non-existent element of managing resources, teams, or efforts. Neither, has she ever been exposed to works like "The Effective Executive" to draw on some of the timeless wisdom. The only thing which remains, according to me, is her collective experience.

My parents, and consequently, we have grown up in quite a typical conservative Indian household. While, my family has rejected many regressive facets, certain patterns, and the associated countenances, continue to manifest themselves – one of the major ones being the role of women as primarily a housemaker. Maybe, India still finds itself in the early stages of Drucker's continuing feminist experiment.

I chose to write about the Drucker Challenge, the emotional glass ceiling, the emergence of resilience, and leadership, as these paradigms have helped me unravel the mystery of my mother's self-development towards effectiveness, in an excessively non-conductive culture. Her compassion as a family manager, time management while balancing the twin lives, fortitude in fighting against the deep-seated structural prejudices in the patriarchal Indian society, and the patience in educating us about it, have distilled in her critical thinking – led leadership. In the male-dominated healthcare industry¹, within a society that has carefully

¹ The male-female ration of healthcare workers is 1.6 while that of doctors is 5.1 (2016). Source: [World Health Organisation](#)

constructed the home-maker identity of a woman over several centuries, my mother has risen to the Drucker's challenge and shattered numerous glass ceilings!

Words: 2,999 (Excluding References)

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