

Letter to the 21st Century Knowledge Professional

Dear colleagues,

Once, there was a bridge to be built over river Ganges in India. The settlement on one side of the river had started to prosper and produce items in abundance, which could be traded. Crossing the river via boat had become a challenge due to the ever-increasing loads. The elders decided that a bridge would serve their interests in a better way. Experts in various fields were summoned which included a civil engineer, metallurgist and wood artisan. They were given a free hand in selection of materials and workers. A makeshift residence was allotted to them that doubled up as their office space.

As their work progressed, differences arose. The civil engineer claimed as per his calculations that the bridge required x material for a certain load. The metallurgist was of the opinion that y metal should not be used for the structure as it may deteriorate given the region's environmental conditions. The wood artisan argued that he always followed a certain way of shaping and fixing wooden structures, which was not acceptable by the other two. The argument went on for days. Finally, a consensus was hastily arrived at due to time constraints. Workers were gathered and the bridge was built.

The structure started to show cracks and it collapsed within a few months. The entire settlement was surprised. The people in charge were the best in their fields. They had great credentials and had received awards for their contribution. So, what went wrong and why was the structure built sub-optimally?

The Spirit of Renaissance:

Yes, you guessed it right! Specialization, being the sole driver, caused the project to go astray. Knowledge from different fields clashed against one another. The team missed a crucial link – a person who could see the big picture, align the strengths of everyone, and come up with an optimal design. A person who could break silos and effectively synthesize to deliver results. In effect, the team missed a 'Renaissance Manager'.

Renaissance, in itself, means 'reawakening'. It implies broadening of one's horizons. It acts as a catalyst towards challenging dogmas and coming up with a radically different line of thinking for the greater good. A 'Renaissance Manager' is someone who is a visionary and possesses an uncanny ability to synthesize knowledge from varied fields for a common goal. He can approach problems in a holistic way. He is a perfect embodiment of balance between rationality and judgement. By virtue of his broad-mindedness, he can assess the present trends and identify emerging patterns that will define the tomorrow. He is essentially a people person who knows how to co-ordinate an expert's actions to make the work output serve as an input to the next person in comprehensible terms.

Management as of today and the ideal:

Management, in today's era, has somehow strayed away from its primary purpose – to manage. It has branched out into several specialized knowledge areas such as marketing, finance, operations, human resources, systems, analytics etc. The management education system of today, somehow forces the students to 'specialize' in a particular field. Some Business Schools have gone to the extent of defining a specific stream in management as early as in the 1st term. It gives little chance to students to explore different streams. It makes them blind to the fact that management is a liberal art. An effective manager draws upon all the knowledge and insights of the humanities and the social sciences – on psychology and philosophy, on economics and history, on ethics – as well as on the physical sciences. He uses this knowledge gathered from various fields in delivering results – be it making a brand out of a commodity or dealing with a labor union unrest.¹

Management, ideally, is about human beings. Its task is to make people capable of joint performance, to make their strengths effective and their weaknesses irrelevant.² Peter Drucker stresses on the fact that a manager should be able to see through the clutter. He should know the tools and techniques. He should understand, but not get too involved in the details. However, he should use methods as a way of management and not management itself. His first and foremost task is 'to manage people'. Moreover, when people are involved, management does not remain a pure science.

The relevance of Peter Drucker in my professional life:

Having been a professional in the automobile industry, I embarked upon a cross-functional project during my initial days. I worked in an organization that manufactured automotive components. We had to decide on a product entry strategy in an already crowded marketplace. My role required managing top internal stakeholders from marketing and R&D so that we could create an optimum product as per client expectations. Automotive research, in itself, is a very specialized knowledge and the R&D head was on the top of his game. He was a product-focused person. On the other hand, the marketing head was customer-focused. A veteran in the automotive industry, he had an intuitive sense about what would work in the marketplace. Managing people from very different backgrounds in itself was a daunting task for a newbie like me. Above all, the challenges were compounded due to certain human dynamics prevalent in the organization.

Though a little clueless at first, I had my skin in the game. Marketing and strategy were the majors and minors respectively during my MBA education. I understood that my

¹ Peter Drucker, *The Essential Drucker*, (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 15.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

current role demanded of me to break my mental blocs and knowledge silos. It required the mind of a product manager – one who understands the product as well as the customer equally well. The product manager must rally together his resources to create a product that exceeds or at least satisfies client requirements. That is when I turned to Peter Drucker – himself a renaissance man to help me maneuver through the project. Drucker states, “A manager has two specific tasks. The first is creation of a true whole that is larger than the sum of its parts, a productive entity that turns out more than the sum of the references put into it. The second specific task of the manager is to harmonize in every decision and action the requirements of immediate and long-range future”.³ I strived to synthesize the different functions by effectively communicating with the department in-charges and developing objectives and initiatives through joint discussions. Every action was arrived at after collaborative decision-making. The downside was that the duration of the project increased. However, the upside nullified the downside in a way that it encouraged people from diverse backgrounds to brainstorm and own the decision.

I believe that I should have done these additional things in my project. Management, after all, is all about managing people. I should have given due time to socialize with the various stakeholders outside the office setting. This would have given me a window to view those individuals’ minds and understand their beliefs and motivations. I should have gone a level deeper in understanding people. In essence, it was good that I was blind to people’s choices that brought objectivity in decision-making. Nevertheless, I missed to incorporate the human element. These would have expedited the entire project. I could have moved things faster and taken better decisions. Therefore, my first job stint provided a true mirror of my own self. It revealed my areas of improvement so that I could broaden my vision and keep progressing on the path of embodying Drucker’s Renaissance Manager.

The ideal manager’s role in evolving organization strategy:

Drucker has clearly pointed out that a manager must harmonize in every decision and action the requirements of long-range future. Long-range future inevitably points to an organization’s vision and the roadmap to get there – the organization strategy. Game-changing strategies are born of creative thinking: a spark of intuition, a connection between different ways of thinking, a leap into the unexpected.⁴ ‘Combination’ of different ideas has been described as a possible way to create the next big business strategy. A good example is WeChat. What began as a social media platform in China gave users an option to buy and sell products within their social networks through an integrated mobile payment platform called WeChat Pay. ‘Context’ is another approach to create a game-changing strategy. The entire idea of ‘context’ revolves around taking inspiration

³ Peter Drucker, *Management – Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, (New York, Truman Talley Books, 1986), 274.

⁴ Adam Brandenburger, “Strategy needs creativity”, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (2019): 59-65.

from unrelated industries, ideas and disciplines and apply them in the current context. Strategy focused on context may involve transferring a solution from one setting to another more or less as is⁵.

How can the ideal manager synthesize requirements of the long-range future if he does not have an appreciation of several bodies of knowledge? How can he perform the task effectively if he is trapped in specialization?

An ideal manager has a huge role to play in defining the tomorrow of his organization. He must recognize emerging trends elsewhere that might affect his business. He must be able to connect the dots and see a big picture of where his business should be in the years to come. It is in separating the signals from the noise where the true ability of an ideal manager lies. Drucker's focus on synthesis of requirements of immediate and long-range future calls for a manager who is well-rounded in his abilities, is well-versed with the present state and yet keeps a tab on the future, gains knowledge from distinct fields and sources, tries to recognize patterns and then applies his understanding to do his job – to manage.

The role of a manager in managing specialists in an organization:

An organization depends on strategists, marketers, accountants, production planners, human resource professionals and other specialists. Specialists know everything about something. Their functional competence stems from their experience, education and research work. However, as stated by Drucker, “a knowledge worker can be effective only if he has learned to do one thing very well, that is, if he has specialized. By itself, however, specialty is a fragment and sterile.”⁶ In addition, some specialists in every organization want to remain specialists and they do not see themselves as a part of the whole. They owe their allegiance to their technical skill and not to the organization.⁷ In such a situation, a specialist needs a manager who can channelize his knowledge and actions towards joint results.

I would like to bring in examples from sports and music to further strengthen the point of being an ideal manager. Led Zeppelin, the iconic rock band from England is a famous case in point. It is argued that Led Zeppelin would not have been as successful as they are if not for their band manager Peter Grant. Grant, with his management acumen, ensured that 90% of the gate money from concerts landed up with the band. He was credited to have negotiated the highest ever royalty rate for a band, which was five times that of the Beatles.⁸ He single-handedly tipped the balance in favor of artists from promoters thereby setting new standards in artist management. As per John Paul Jones (Led Zeppelin Bass guitarist and Keyboardist), “Peter trusted us to get the music together,

⁵ Adam Brandenburger, “Strategy needs creativity”, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (2019): 59-65.

⁶ Drucker, *The Essential Drucker*, 180.

⁷ Drucker, *Management – Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, 271.

⁸ Business Management Degree, “15 Top Music Managers of all time”, accessed June 5, 2019, <https://www.business-management-degree.net/music-managers/>.

and then just kept everybody else away, making sure we had the space to do whatever we wanted without interference from anybody – press, record company, promoters.”⁹ That is how a Renaissance Manager should be! He must challenge the status quo and implement radically different ideas that move the needle.

Sachin Tendulkar had just started to make his mark in international cricket when Mark Mascarenhas spotted him. He promised Sachin, “You focus on your game and leave the rest to me.”¹⁰ Mark shielded Sachin from off-field happenings in every way he could. It gave ample breathing space to Sachin. He did not have to negotiate endorsements and contracts. He could focus on what he did best – playing cricket. In a way, Mark pioneered sports celebrity management in India.

The above examples clearly point out the following fact. One of the major reasons of the successes of Led Zeppelin and Sachin Tendulkar was that they had great managers; managers like Peter Grant who understood the music industry scene in US or like Mark Mascarenhas who knew the sports management industry in India. They let the specialists do their job and while co-ordinating their actions that resulted in immense success for both.

Therefore, a specialist is important in today’s world where knowledge is the foremost weapon. However, more important are those Renaissance Managers who can manage those specialists, drive their actions towards joint results, have a holistic view of how things should be and strive eternally to chart their own course.

Yours sincerely,
An aspiring Renaissance Manager

⁹ Barc Homes, “I don’t come to you with my problems, do I?,” accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/i-dont-come-you-my-problems-do-barc-holmes>.

¹⁰ Vivek Kamath, “How Mark Mascarenhas Redefined Celebrity Management,” accessed June 13, 2019, <http://www.forbesindia.com/article/2013-celebrity-100/how-mark-mascarenhas-redefined-celebrity-management/36751/1>.