

Leonardo in the Boardroom: On the Need for Renaissance Managers

If you wander far enough down the Avenida Juarez in Teotitlán del Valle, Mexico, you'll come to a colorful storefront among the small town's mostly dust-colored facades. This is Dulcería Magui, a candy and toy shop emblazoned with hand-painted murals of SpongeBob and Mickey Mouse; on most afternoons you'll smell its fresh cajeta on the breeze and see Margarita, or "Magui," standing in the doorway and offering a friendly wave as you pass.

I met Margarita last summer while working as an English teacher and interest-free microlender in Teotitlán, after graduating from an American business school and before starting work as a management consultant in New York City. Margarita was my most advanced student in a class of twenty, stringing together long English sentences learned from tourists or American TV; she is also one of the most versatile managers I've ever known.

On the morning I met her, Margarita doggedly convinced a local tour guide to route all of his tours to Teotitlán, to drive business to local artisans. She had taught herself computer skills and created an allotment system for the mercado, so craftspeople could share prized plots. Margarita made papier-mâché piñatas, coloring books, and baked goods, and used a local courier to source school supplies for town children. Deeply interested in the American economy, she brimmed with questions for me and made a point of connecting with anyone she met.

Partially out of necessity, Margarita is a Renaissance Manager: a leader with a wide variety of talents and interests, who uses these skills to direct an enterprise or group in an especially innovative and productive way.

Peter Drucker, himself an accomplished polymath, established a framework for understanding management in this fashion – as an interdisciplinary calling, part art and part science, that emerges when leaders engage creatively with those around them to inspire uncommon results. As Drucker observed, "Leadership is not magnetic personality... [it] is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard."¹

In our age of information and specialization, when algorithms can increasingly illuminate *what* a business could do, it is Renaissance Managers who show *how* a business should do it, by engaging with a wide swath of information, filtering it, and using it to inspire diverse types of people. As Drucker keenly summarized, "Strategy is a commodity, execution is an art."²

And as in a great symphony, that art requires managers to be conductors of large orchestras, rather than skilled soloists, specialized in their craft. Renaissance Management is critical today

¹ Peter F. Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1974), 370.

² Jean-Marie Dru, *Thank You for Disrupting: The Disruptive Business Philosophies of The World's Great Entrepreneurs*. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), 61.

because it gives its practitioners a richer sense of creative possibility, a higher degree of interpersonal relatability, and ultimately drives them to ask the right questions, over and over again, if needed.

A richer sense of creative possibility

Wherever you turn today, essays and seminars herald our era as an age of specialization. A huge and growing global workforce, ballooning computing power and the widespread impact of Moore's Law have pushed many fields to a level of complexity that make it difficult for a single man or woman to master one much less several domains. Gone are the Renaissance figures of yesterday – from da Vinci to Franklin – who could excel simultaneously across disciplines.

In the narrow sense, this is unavoidably true. Where once a polymath could publish a popular Almanac in the morning and reorient our science of electricity in the afternoon, leading minds must now be transfixed by their areas of focus or else risk losing their positions at the cutting edge. Increasingly, in any particular field, a leader's degree of specialization and his or her level of innovation seem to be directly correlated.

Yet this should not be construed as an indictment of interdisciplinary learning or leadership. On the contrary, Renaissance Managers are uniquely positioned to excel in today's economy, because their exposure to a wide base of learning gives them a far richer sense of possibility.

This creative vision allows them to make more informed strategic choices, because they are quicker to discern what they fully grasp and what they do not. In contrast to the sciences, where a biologist might not apply the lessons of astronomy in the lab, a manager who can draw on several fields is better positioned to solve problems – and to teach others how to do so, as well.

Art Markman illustrated this dynamic in his essay, "Do You Know What You Don't Know?" This essential question should be at the top of every manager's mind; and the Renaissance Manager is, by far, the one best positioned to answer. "Help identify the knowledge gaps of the people around you," Markman writes, "When you do uncover these gaps, treat them as learning opportunities, not signs of weakness. After all, successful innovation rests on the assumption that you and the people around you have a high-quality understanding of the problem."³ Leaders with narrow expertise are not prone to identify these gaps, much less leverage them as teachable instances, since they do not have the broad vision or ability to efficiently work across disciplines.

However, according to Peter Drucker, that is precisely what effective management is predicated upon: the application and performance of knowledge.⁴ As Drucker observed, "We now accept

³ Art Markman, "Do You Know What You Don't Know?", Harvard Business Review, May, 2012.

⁴ Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*. (Oxford, UK: Reed International, 1993), 40.

the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.”⁵

Renaissance Managers engage in this lifelong process for a myriad of reasons, often because it is a natural outworking of the curious mind. They use this accumulated knowledge to contextualize what they and their teams know and don’t know, and seek creative possibilities for bridging that gap.

A higher degree of interpersonal relatability

In addition to opening creative possibility, Renaissance Management gives its practitioners an advantage over their specialized counterparts because it endows them with greater interpersonal relatability. Renaissance Managers know that relating in the right ways to people is a key means to inspire others to become leaders themselves.

If we absorb Peter Drucker’s idea that business is, at heart, a largely sociological enterprise, predicated on moving others, then this person-to-person connection is paramount; if we recognize that the workforce today is getting more diverse, then we should concede that relatability will become an even greater asset for tomorrow’s manager.

Effective leaders must have empathy, without which they would never retain followers in the first place. (Could you imagine Leonardo painting the Last Supper or Thomas Jefferson running an administration without the buy-in of teams?) This trait is surely anchored first in some purely intellectual epiphany – the recognition of others’ struggles. Yet empathy is mostly a feature of emotional intelligence, and Renaissance Managers are more apt to express this because they are more likely to draw the requisite connections across people.

As was noted in *Harvard Business Review* last year, “Historically, being a manager is about being directive and telling people what to do.” However, recent scholarship has revealed that “connector” management yields far greater results, a finding echoed in a survey of leading human capital specialists. This form of management involves, “asking the right questions, providing tailored feedback, and helping employees make a connection to a colleague who can help them.”⁶ Notice how sensitive a touch – and how global an awareness – this form of management requires.

Such a finding would surely not come as a surprise to Peter Drucker, who realized that a whole-systems perspective can give a manager a unique sensitivity to the needs of a team.

⁵ Peter F. Drucker, *Classic Drucker: Essential Wisdom of Peter Drucker from the Pages of Harvard Business Review*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2006), 140-142.

⁶ “Managers Can’t Be Great Coaches All by Themselves”, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 2018.

“The leaders who work most effectively,” Drucker summarized, “never say ‘I.’... They think ‘we’; they think ‘team.’ They understand their job to be to make the team function.”⁷ Each of us can surely recall moments where we saw leaders take this responsibility and will a collective outcome. A critical question must then arise: how could someone do this if he or she did not deeply empathize with others?

Asking the right questions – over and over again

Too often, we are content to remain baffled by the genius of polymaths. A mind like Leonardo da Vinci’s, we mere mortals assume, must have functioned on some higher plane: an intelligence that versatile could not have been grounded in anything like the banal conditions of our daily work.

A close reading of history belies this assumption, and in a way that should be deeply heartening to those of us who spend much of our professional hours updating workflows, double-checking spreadsheets, and waiting on the line in conference calls. For even Leonardo was, undoubtedly, a manager – one whose brilliance stemmed from the place where his childlike curiosity fused with a powerful executive instinct.

In Walter Isaacson’s much lauded biography of the Great Man, we see that da Vinci was concerned with logistics, scoping his projects and keeping detailed to-do lists to manage both projects and people. See, for example, one of these lists which dates to his time in Milan in the 1490s:

Get the master of arithmetic to show you how to square a triangle... Ask Giannino the Bombardier about how the tower of Ferrara is walled... Get a master of hydraulics to tell you how to repair a lock, canal and mill in the Lombard manner... Get the measurement of the sun promised me by Maestro Giovanni Francese, the Frenchman.⁸⁹

Take note of how banal this brilliance is. He is concerned with sourcing information from the best minds at his disposal – extracting specialized knowledge for a highly unspecialized set of questions.

From there, Leonardo typically had to create buy-in for his schemes from governmental and clerical gatekeepers, all while administering his subordinates. In advocating his plans for the Milan cathedral, for example, da Vinci convinced administrators by promising that he would direct his artisans in “the authority of ancient architects,” while finding ways to experiment with innovative techniques. “In other words,” Isaacson notes, “he was advocating our modern

⁷ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 10-14.

⁸ Leonardo da Vinci [compiled by Irma A. Richter], *Leonardo Da Vinci’s Notebooks* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1952), 283-284.

⁹ Walter Isaacson, *Leonardo da Vinci*. (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 22-24.

method of combining theory, experiment, and handed-down knowledge—and constantly testing them against each other.”¹⁰

And how else could it be? To embody a Renaissance Man and woman – to be someone widely engaged by the world and its large-scale problems – you have to be capable of marshalling people, resources, and even your time in a highly regimented way. You have to be a manager, at least to a degree. Leonardo, history’s greatest renaissance mind, refutes the idea of the genius locked in the tower. As Isaacson concludes, “Slapping the ‘genius’ label on Leonardo, oddly, minimizes him by making it seem as if he were touched by lightning... in fact Leonardo’s genius was a human one... based on skills we can aspire to improve in ourselves, such as curiosity and intense observation.”¹¹

Peter Drucker brilliantly captured this exact same concept in his book *A Functioning Society*, where he predicts that, for managers, “learning must become a lifelong process... managers have to learn to ask every few years of every process, every product, every procedure, every policy, ‘If we did not do this already, would we go into it now knowing what we now know?’”¹²

Drucker’s insight here has several implications – about the pace of technological change, the future of our educational system – but what should perhaps strike us most is the call to be Renaissance Managers. *Every* element of the modern organization should be examined and reexamined *every* few years; to build truly successful companies and institutions, managers must be renaissance men and women, deeply engaged in the wide sweep of their processes, products, and personnel.

Drucker certainly found this challenge invigorating rather than daunting, and so should we. As Renaissance Managers, our calling isn’t to contain everything in ourselves. Rather, like Maggie and da Vinci, it is to intuit possibilities, develop relatability, and ask the right questions – over and over again, if needed.

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¹⁰ Ibid., 242-243.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Peter F. Drucker, *A Functioning Society: Community, Society, and Polity in the Twentieth Century*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 180.