

The Five Deadly Managerial Sins in Times of Crisis

“Hello!”

“Uh...hello?”

“Ah yes, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Peter Drucker.”

“I can see *that*. But didn’t you leave, er...your earthly form back in 2005?”

“Yes, that’s right actually. And it’s 2021 now, so let me correct myself. I’m an apparition.”

“That doesn’t make things any better. Why is an apparition of Peter Drucker making an appearance in this world in 2021?”

“Because the world is going through a raging pandemic.”

“So you’re like a messenger angel?”

“Well, sort of, yes.”

“That’s exciting. Are you appearing before me because I’m the only one who can save the world from covid?”

“No. Definitely not that.”

“Then is it the opposite, and you’re trying to warn me that everyone is going to die and I’m the only who will survive this virus of death?”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, no? And something that only happens to American teenagers in Hollywood movies?”

“Maybe you’re here to tell me the secret formula for a vaccine against this deadly virus?”

“Not that either, I’m afraid. Edward Jenner’s apparition is already taking care of that elsewhere.”

“Then would you explain why you’re here please?”

“It’s because I’m worried the pandemic is giving rise to a crisis of management at workplaces around the world. There’s a desperate need for reinventing the myth of management. I’ve come to show how.”

“Interesting. I didn’t realise there was a myth of management in the first place, let alone that it needed reinventing.”

“Oh, but all the big ideas that rule our world are nothing but myths. In the words of Yuval Noah Harari, ‘Any large scale human cooperation is rooted in common myths that exist only in people’s collective imagination.’¹ All the rules we hold sacred and immutable are but socially

¹Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: a Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015).

reinforced myths devised by the human imagination. Which means that they can be reinvented at the behest of human imagination. These socially reinforced myths are useful to the limited extent that they serve some purpose for the advancement of human civilisation. If they cease to do that, they need to be reinvented. That is what I mean when I say we need to reinvent the myth of management in these times of crisis.”

“Okay. But you’re the *father* of modern management. I’m just a humble government servant in a small town in India. Why are you appearing before me?”

“Well I had originally planned to reveal myself to that nice earnest girl from Sweden. But I was worried she had her hands full with fighting climate change and whatnot, so here we are.”

“That’s cute. But I’m serious. What have I got to do with reinventing the myth of management?”

“Oh everything! I believe a manager is anyone who performs the functions of setting objectives, organising groups, motivating teams, measuring performance, and developing people.² Isn’t that a profile that applies to you? As a government servant, you routinely have to take decisions that impact the lives of other people, and the stakes are even higher in a pandemic situation. The crisis will call on you to rise to the occasion by reinventing your management style.”

“All right. How do I do that?”

“Well the first step is to identify what you might be doing wrong currently. Many years ago, I wrote an article for The Wall Street Journal called *The Five Deadly Business Sins*.³ In a similar vein, I’d like to start busting the myth of management with *The Five Deadly Managerial Sins in Times of Crisis*.”

“That’s a little unwieldy to say but we can work on the title later I suppose. What are these five deadly managerial sins in times of crisis, pray elucidate?”

“Okay, here goes:

One: Squandering the opportunity inherent in crisis. I’ve written this in one of my books, and it bears repeating here - ‘A time of turbulence is also one of great opportunity for those who can understand, accept and exploit the new realities.’⁴ Of course, when I say ‘exploit new realities’ I certainly don’t mean to suggest you indulge in mercenary profiteering by hoarding oxygen cylinders during the pandemic and selling them at exorbitant prices in the black market. That’s

² Peter F. Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

³ Peter F. Drucker, "The Five Deadly Business Sins," *The Wall Street Journal*, (October 1993).

⁴ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing in Turbulent Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

downright unethical and immoral. When I say a crisis is an opportunity to exploit new realities, I mean it's a ripe time to execute plans that wouldn't attract support during ordinary times. Do you know, that's basically how London got its sewerage system? Proposals to modernise the sewerage system had been floated since the 1700s but were shelved due to prohibitive costs. As a result, the river Thames functioned as a foul-smelling, open-air sewer for a long time. It wasn't until the cholera outbreak of the 1850s prompted authorities to take notice of the problem, that good money was invested in building a proper underground sanitation system for the wastewater in London.⁵ You'll agree the health sector in India is going through a similar moment of reckoning during this pandemic. Against the 5000 hospital beds per million people recommended by WHO, for instance, India has only 600 beds per million.⁶ During any other time, there would be competing, more urgent claims on the country's resources, such as from the military or education sector. But a pandemic is an opportune time to ask for funding in public health, and to push for augmenting the health infrastructure in your jurisdiction. As a government official, you have to be more proactive in seizing such opportunities presented by the crisis. Business as usual will set you back decades not only in public health in this case, but also in good governance generally.

“Two: Responding to today's crisis with yesterday's logic. I don't mean to blow my own trumpet, but I've given many memorable, quotable quotes over the years, haven't I? And one of the more memorable ones was - The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence itself; it is to *act with yesterday's logic*.⁷ A crisis is a time to innovate by asking questions like - what can we afford to abandon? What are the things we thought indispensable but can manage just fine without, or easily replace? Let me give you an example that might resonate with you. The Indian bureaucracy is notorious for its love for physical files and for pushing paper around. This is so intrinsic to the Indian work culture, that I believe there were even reports in the Indian papers about companies giving fake essential worker IDs to their employees to force them to come to work, which was a terrible thing to do.⁸ Pushing paper around while sitting in an office cubicle from 9 to 5

⁵ Emily Mann, "Story of cities #14: London's Great Stink heralds a wonder of the industrial world." *The Guardian*, April 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/04/story-cities-14-london-great-stink-river-thames-joseph-bazalgette-sewage-system>

⁶ Arjun Srinivas, "What must be done before a third wave?" *www.livemint.com*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/science/health/what-must-be-done-before-a-third-wave-11622734978015.html>

⁷ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing in Turbulent Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

⁸ Shephali Bhatt, "For some companies, it's 'Work from Office' by fear means or foul." *The Economic Times*, April 21, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/tech-bytes/for-some-companies-its-work-from-office-by-fear-means-or-foul/articleshow/82167556.cms?from=mdr>.

is yesterday's logic. Today the idea of 'work from home' has gained widespread currency in the midst of this pandemic. It should serve as a catalyst to implement e-office solutions to replace physical files, allowing employees to work from anywhere. Any manager who can assign work from home but still insists on physical attendance in office due to archaic notions of productivity is making the huge mistake of operating on yesterday's logic. Not only are you risking lives unnecessarily, which is the obvious danger, but you also risk alienating employees through your lack of empathy.

“Three: Choosing the wrong compromise. I like to explain this one with a favourite analogy of mine, which is that half a loaf of bread is better than no bread, but half a baby is worse than no baby at all.⁹ All this is to say that as a manager, you have to choose what's an acceptable compromise to you - if you could only get half of what you want, would you choose half a loaf of bread or half a baby? It is obvious that one of them is the wrong compromise. I'll explain with a concrete example. From what I understand, religion in India is a political hotbed and a sensitive issue, which no public servant dare interfere in. As a result, the authorities have not had the courage to ban large religious gatherings even at the peak of the pandemic, for fear of hurting religious sentiments. Of course, that's the wrong compromise to choose. Would you rather choose half a baby and compromise your conscience, your *dharma* as a public servant, by allowing large religious gatherings in the midst of a pandemic? Or would you rather accept half a loaf of bread and take the unpopular decision to temporarily ban all large gatherings if it ensures public health and safety?

“Four: Trying to improve things you haven't measured. I began to feel like I had truly joined the ranks of the greats only when I started finding apocryphal quotes being attributed to me. That's an honour usually reserved for Thomas Edison, or Albert Einstein. One such quip often erroneously attributed to me is, 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it.' But I must say I do agree with the sentiment. I'm sure that as a government servant there is enormous pressure on you to bring down the number of covid-19 cases in your jurisdiction. The way that is measured is through the number of tests that return positive. Faced with this pressure, a lot of your colleagues would be tempted to simply reduce testing in their jurisdiction, which would automatically bring down the positive cases as well. This might personally bring them short term relief from the wrath of their superiors and bosses. But ultimately, it would be detrimental to the health of the community, because if you don't measure the number of positive cases within your jurisdiction, you won't be able to take informed decisions on important matters, such as arranging for requisite hospital beds and ventilators, say, or

⁹ Peter F. Drucker, "The Effective Decision." *Harvard Business Review*, (January 1967).

knowing when it's safe to reopen schools and businesses. One of the lessons proffered by this pandemic is that measuring things and tracking progress are indispensable tools of governance, and the sooner you learn it the better.

“Five: Treating employees like conscripts rather than volunteers. Managers complain that employees don't take ownership of the organisation, while employees complain that management doesn't care about their welfare, and never the twain shall meet. I believe this discord stems from the fact that workers have far more career options open to them with the advent of the knowledge economy and the gig economy, but managers continue to treat their employees like conscripts rather than volunteers. They expect obedience instead of building consensus, they prefer talking instead of listening, they believe in ruling with an iron fist instead of decentralising control, and they are quick to assign blame instead of fixing accountability. You should guard against such officious tendencies, especially during a pandemic such as this one. For example, I understand that you are planning to hold a meeting with your employees soon to give them a talk on professionalism? You are planning to tell them that while no one is unaffected by this pandemic, professionalism demands that one should leave behind their personal life at home and get on with the job. I would advise against holding a meeting like that. You must guard against letting your need for control in these uncertain times turn into tyranny towards your employees. The pandemic is a hard time for everyone. Your employees are probably *languishing*,¹⁰ and morale is likely very low. It is difficult to care about deadlines and targets when a loved one is in the hospital, when weddings and birthday plans get disrupted, when that nice family vacation in the summer has to be shelved because of lockdown. This pandemic is unleashing a disease that's mysterious, contagious and sometimes fatal, but it is also leaving an insidious impact on the mental health of a lot of people. So make sure you always recognise that behind the worker is a human being, and make sure that your management style stems from a place of kindness and empathy. Even small gestures go a long way. Give paid leave to your employees, allow work from home, extend deadlines, and most important, call up your employees to make sure everything is okay with them. To come down on employees harder, to accuse them of shirking their work, to treat genuine fears as excuses for tardiness—this would be the greatest managerial sin of them all, in my opinion.”

“Whew. That was a lot of information to digest.”

“Was it insightful?”

“It was, yes. But I'm not sure I'm qualified to handle it...I'm no management expert and—”

¹⁰ Adam Grant, "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing." *The New York Times*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html?smid=url-share>.

“Dear child, history is replete with instances of ordinary people churning out masterpieces in fields they were ostensibly no experts in, simply because of the divine confidence bestowed by ethereal dreams and visions. As an example, Moses comes to mind, for one. Srinivas Ramanujan is another such example. He frequently saw visions of a Hindu goddess who supplied him with complex mathematical formulae that became testament of his genius. Why, Mary Shelley was a young girl just like you when she wrote her magnum opus *Frankenstein* following a vivid dream she had as a teenager. Now I’m not *telling* you to write an entire essay about me and my biblical message on managerial sins. Just that there are other people who saw visions and decided to do something about it, you know? Anyway, I’ll be off now. Remember to wear that mask and stay safe!”

I wake up from my reverie and immediately start typing this essay.

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