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## Management as a Liberal Art (China)

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**China Trip  
August 2010**

**“Management as a Liberal Art”**

**C. William Pollard**

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Peter Drucker is often referred to as the Father of Modern Day Management. Over the last 100 years, the practice of management has transformed the social and economic fabric of the world’s developed countries and has contributed to the creation of a global economy.

Drucker considered the **development of management as a discipline** and the **recognition of management as a liberal art** to be two of his most important contributions to the study and practice of management.

As a discipline, management has allowed us to convert knowledge into a capital resource. As a discipline, it has involved the development of various organizational structures, procedures, methods, and systems for getting the right things done through the combined efforts of people with a diversity of knowledge, skills, and talents.

Drucker has reminded us, however, that as a discipline, management was also a liberal art. It was about the management of people, not just things. Every organization was a human community. Therefore, the effective manager should seek an understanding of the human condition, including a recognition of the spiritual dimension of our humanity and its contribution to character development.

In giving advice to leaders of both profit and nonprofit organizations, Peter Drucker often began by asking the question: “What is your business?” His purpose was not just to understand what the organization did and whether it was effective in so doing, but also to determine whether the organization’s leadership understood their responsibility for the growth and development of the people producing the results. It was his way of introducing the subject of “management as a liberal art.”

Management as a liberal art is about the development of the whole person (not just a pair of hands). It is about developing people’s skills and talents, but also it is about developing their character, integrity, and nurturing a spirit of giving back and putting the interests of others ahead of their own interest. It is about treating people as the subject of work, not just the object of work. It is about understanding who people are and why they work, not just what they do and how they do it. It is about providing a meaning and purpose for work. It is about the development of human capital as a resource and product of the firm.

Drucker suggested that to understand the human condition, one needed to draw upon the knowledge and insights of the humanities and social sciences, including psychology, philosophy, economics, history, and ethics. If managers and leaders were serious about developing the whole person, they should know and understand their source of moral authority and have a purpose and meaning for life and work.

On questions of a philosophy of life and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. For Drucker, his faith brought a meaning and purpose to life. In his essay entitled “The Unfashionable Kierkegaard”, Drucker quoted from Kierkegaard and said,

“Human existence is possible as existence **not in despair**, as existence **not in tragedy**, but is possible as **existence in faith**. Faith is the belief that in **God** the **impossible** is possible, that in Him, time and eternity **are one**, that **both life and death are meaningful**. Faith is the knowledge that man is a creature- **not autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center**- yet responsible and free.” For Drucker, people were not just biological or physiological beings, but were also spiritual beings who were created and existed for a purpose.

Drucker’s conclusions about people and the importance of understanding the nature of our human condition may be summarized as follows:

1. The uniqueness and value of people should be cherished and honored. Every person, regardless of status or position, has dignity and worth and their own fingerprint of potential.
2. People have freedom to make certain choices in life, including how they will live, what they will do with their time, and how they will relate to others.

3. People are imperfect in the exercise of their freedom to choose and can make choices that are wrong or harmful to others. Although free to make certain choices, people are not free from the consequences of their choices or the responsibility for their actions.
  
4. The responsible person will be guided by a sense of humility and of accountability to the will of a higher moral authority and also will be well aware of their own imperfection.

As a Christian, Drucker looked to God as his higher authority. He was optimistic about human potential, yet he was also realistic about human fallibility in such things as pettiness and greed, vanity, and the lust for power.

Although the practice of management as a liberal art raises the question of God and the need for a person's response to that question, Drucker also would say that in light of the differences in cultures and beliefs of people, it could not, nor should it, demand a uniform response.

For example, Drucker also recognized that in Confucian thought and ethics, there were fundamental guidelines for the moral behavior of people, including the virtues of righteousness, wisdom, trustworthiness, and the importance of **“earned” leadership and authority.**

Management as a liberal art, however, does require moral leadership and, therefore, managers and leaders need:

1. To know and understand what is their source of authority for determining moral behavior.
2. To know what they believe and why they believe it.
3. To know where they are headed and why it is important for people to follow.
4. To be an example in their private and public life of the practice of right behavior.
5. To be willing to walk in the shoes of those they lead.
6. To help and guide people to find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work, a commitment to truth, and a strong ethic that extends to the care and service of others.

When management is practiced as a liberal art, the work environment becomes a catalyst for innovation, respect, and a performance level that often exceeds expectations. This was the grand experiment of ServiceMaster.

What is your business?

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