

Management guru and philosopher

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Article

- Comment - New Sunday Times - 01/01/2006

The year 2005 saw the world made a lot poorer by the death of many personalities: a pope, a literary figure, an inventor, a footballer and our very own traditional and heritage art lover.

Not to mention the many talented people swept away by wars and violence, tsunami, hurricanes, earthquakes and, most recently, the floods at home and abroad.

Let us also remember Peter Drucker, who died of natural causes, eight days before his 96th birthday.



Born on Nov 19, 1909 in Austria, Drucker was known for a number of management-related concepts, namely management by objective (MBO), privatisation, decentralisation and outsourcing, among others.

He coined key ideas such as "knowledge workers" in the late 1950s, long before it became a buzzword of today; he was also noted for his emphasis on human resource development (HRD), innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship.

All these can be traced in the more than 40 books that he wrote, beginning with *The End of Economic Man: The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1939, until the latest. *The Effective Executive in Action*, co-authored with Joseph A. Maciariello to be published this month. Two of his books are novels, another an autobiography.

His first title in 1939 expresses the idea that individual social needs are also important and that a sense of community is essential among employees in organisations. The idea, however, was not taken up until much later.

But this is not the case with many other books, such as *The Practice of Management* in 1954, *Landmarks of Tomorrow: A Report on the New 'Post-Modern' World* (1959) where he discussed "knowledge workers". "Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and Principles" (1985).

He wrote articles and columns in leading newspapers, magazines and journals providing new vision and prophetic thought-provoking insights as well.

The Economist, in a special report (Nov 19, 2005), noted: "His reading of history enabled him to see through the fog that clouds less learned minds."

It is not surprising then that many of his works were translated into various languages, making Drucker an international management guru (a designation he was not comfortable with) worldwide.

Even in the days where Asia was economically irrelevant, Drucker argued that America had no monopoly on management wisdom, an insight which later proved correct.

In the main, Drucker set the direction and tone for the future of management.

One of his recent books, *The Daily Drucker: 366 Days of Insight and*

Motivation for Getting the Right Things Done (2004), perhaps said it all, providing daily guidance for an entire year.

A popular one is the separation between management and leadership: "Management is doing things right, leadership is doing the right things."

No doubt his insights and innovations had impacted the views of many well-known corporate and national leaders. More importantly, they also caused thousands of businesses to change course in the workplace and the academe.

Aptly, according to the same issue of *The Economist*: "Wherever people grapple with tricky management problems, from big organisations to small ones, from public sector to the private, and increasingly in the voluntary sector, you can find Mr Drucker's fingerprint."

Vision 2020 challenges

1. Establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one Bangsa Malaysia.
2. Creating a psychologically liberated, secure, and developed Malaysian society with faith and confidence in itself, justifiably proud of what it is, of what it has accomplished, robust enough to face all manner of adversity.
3. Fostering and developing a mature democratic society, practising a form of mature consensual, community-oriented Malaysian democracy.
4. Establishing a fully moral and ethical society, whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest ethical standards.
5. Establishing a matured, liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colour and creed are free to practise and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation.
6. Establishing a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward-looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilisation of the future.
7. Establishing a fully caring society and culture, a social system in which society will come before self, in which the welfare of the people will revolve not around the state or the individual but around a strong and resilient family system.
8. Ensuring an economically just society. This is a society in which there is a fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation, in which there is full partnership in economic progress. Such a society cannot be in place so long as there is the identification of race with economic function, and the identification of economic backwardness with race.
9. Establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

In particular, his work on the management of voluntary organisations, including religious ones, is regarded as cutting edge.

He believed that business corporations have many lessons to learn from such entities, for one, to better engage the enthusiasm of the volunteers (employees).

Such is the significant of one person who believed that management is vital to all institutions, not just corporations, calling it "the organ that converts a mob into an organisation, the human efforts into performance".

Today, many of his ideas are regarded as conventional wisdom, though few caused controversies and some dropped by the wayside.

Still the world will continue to benefit from Drucker, the management thinker-cum-philosopher, as we "rapidly evolve into a post-industrial with a shift in culture and technology as profound as the shift that took place a century ago when our agrarian societies evolved into industrial nations" (Drucker, 1994).

The lessons for Malaysia as it enters into the last phase of Vision 2020 in the next 15 years, would be, as argued by Drucker, to empower the workers, based on nine challenges of Vision 2020.

He harshly criticised the assembly-line system of production, partly because it failed to engage the creativity of individual workers.

And logically by the same token an assembly-line system of education, for much the same reason, especially in the making of a knowledge-worker. Indeed, it is often articulated that the world is rapidly moving from an economy driven by the production of "goods" to that of "knowledge", meaning a societal transformation from one that is dominated by brawn to that of brains.

And if there is one lesson that we need to remember from Drucker is his insistence that this change should not only affect managers but also politicians. Managers should treat workers not like cogs in a huge inhuman machine, but rather as knowledge workers.

Politicians have to realise that knowledge, and thus education, is the single most important resource for any advanced society.

Malaysians are obviously very familiar with such profound ideas and their implications, be they at the managerial or more so at the political levels.

But to Drucker this is not enough. "Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work," he had said

Drucker was also forthright in asserting the superficiality of pursuing short-term goals of making plenty of money within a quick period of time, especially so in today's corporate sector.

It cannot be over-emphasised that excessive greed, with the attendant corruption and unethical practices, is beginning to grip the nation.

As Malaysians dwell on their New Year resolutions, the words and wisdom of Drucker can provide invaluable inspiration.

Let us pay special tribute to one person who has made the world much richer by promoting knowledge as a strategic resource to be harnessed by all.

Here's wishing all Malaysians a very happy, prosperous and peaceful 2006.

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