

Living in More Than One World: How Peter Drucker's Wisdom Can Inspire and Transform Your Life

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This presentation is based on my book of the same name, published in 2009 by Berrett-Koehler. It is based on more than 20 years of research into Peter Drucker's life and work, including interviews with him before his death in 2005 at 95. The seeds of the idea for the book can be traced back to a library management course I took at CUA SLIS in 1986, which introduced me to his writings. I later wrote about him for USA TODAY and the SLA's publication, Information Outlook. Drucker had a large following within the library world, and delivered the keynote presentation to the SLA annual conference in Los Angeles in 2002. (I wrote a feature story at the time from the conference, based on an interview with Drucker, that appeared in USA TODAY July 5, 2002). I also wrote an Information Outlook column about him for the eight months leading up to the conference, in 2001-2002.

The research synthesizes years of "hidden" advice to present a Drucker-inspired compass to managing your life and career in a 21st century full of new challenges and opportunities. Although Drucker was known to many as "the father of modern management," he wrote about personal self-development for more than 50 years, though he never devoted an entire book to it.

Drucker personified the value of creating and living a "total life" with diverse interests, relationships, and pursuits; what he called "living in more than one world." The idea is that when you have a setback in one area—suffering or surviving a layoff, for instance—you can soften the blow by developing other areas of strength and support. You can also add new meaning and dimensions to your life and, by getting involved with activities such as volunteer work, make a difference in the lives of others. How do you create a total life? Consider the following five key elements as exemplified by Drucker himself:

1. Practicing self-development

Self-development is a major theme throughout Drucker's writings and teachings. "What matters," he said, "is that the knowledge worker, by the time he or she reaches middle age, has developed and nourished a human being rather than a tax accountant or a hydraulic engineer." Think about your life, both as it is now and where you'd like to be. Consider not just your work, but also your family, friends, interests, activities, and pursuits. Assess what's working, what's not, and what you might want to add or subtract to create more satisfaction and fulfillment.

2. Identifying and developing your unique strengths

The concept of core competencies may have been created for organizations, but today it applies to individuals as well. Drucker urged people to consciously articulate their own strengths. Consider what's unique about what you do, and in what areas you excel and contribute the most, both at work and outside of work. Focus on those strengths—your own core competencies—and find new ways to value and cultivate them. Odds are you can apply them to a variety of jobs, volunteer positions, and more.

3. Creating a parallel or second career

Drucker said, “The purpose of the work on making the future is not to decide what should be done tomorrow, but what should be done today to have a tomorrow.” One unique idea he advocated was creating a “parallel career” in areas such as teaching, writing, or working in nonprofit organizations. He also encouraged developing a second career, often by doing similar work in a significantly different setting—a lawyer, for instance, might move from a traditional law firm to a legal nonprofit dedicated to a personally meaningful cause. While still in your main job, start thinking about your own possibilities for a parallel or second career. Consider how to match your values, experience, and education, and what shifts you might need to make in your life to support such changes.

4. Exercising your generosity

An essential part of living in more than one world, Drucker believed, is displaying a sense of generosity. Here, he said, “...everybody is a leader, everybody is responsible, everybody acts.” Sharing your time and talents by getting involved in volunteerism, social entrepreneurship, and mentoring not only provide opportunities to contribute, but also offer personal benefits, from broadening and deepening your life experience to expanding your circle of friends and colleagues. Think about what happens outside your workplace—in other industries, professions, and walks of life—and consider ways you can exercise your own generosity.

5. Teaching and learning

Education plays a key role in Drucker's vision of a strong, functioning society. He believed that knowledge workers should never stop learning. However, it's up to them, he said, to incorporate continuous learning as a natural part of daily life—deciding what and how they'd like to learn and determining how they'll build in the time. Consider your own priorities for learning, as well as how you learn best—taking classes, reading articles and books, asking or observing others, etc. You might also want to teach. As Drucker acknowledged, “No one learns as much as the person who must teach his subject.”

Finally, take a deep breath and don't expect everything to happen at once. Start where you are and move towards your total life, one step at a time.

