

TECHNOLOGY

Business Does Not Need the Humanities – But Humans Do

by [Gianpiero Petriglieri](#)

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Sometimes a simple story is all it takes to capture complex issues, or so it seems. Take this one. A few years ago, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg lost a game of Scrabble to a friend's teenage daughter. "Before they played a second game, he wrote a simple computer program that would look up his letters in the dictionary so that he could choose from all possible words," wrote *New Yorker* reporter Evan Osnos. As the girl told it to Osnos, "During the game in which I was playing the program, everyone around us was taking sides: Team Human and Team Machine."

The anecdote was too delicious to ignore, seeming to capture all we (think we) know about Zuckerberg—his casual brilliance, his intense competitiveness, his hyper-rational faith in technology, and the polarizing effect of his compelling software. It went viral.

The story was popular because it easily reads as an allegory: the hacker in chief determined to find a technical solution to every problem, even far more complex ones than Scrabble—fake news, polarization, alienation. “I found Zuckerberg straining, not always coherently, to grasp problems for which he was plainly unprepared,” Osnos concluded after speaking to Zuckerberg extensively about his role in shifting public discourse worldwide. “These are not technical puzzles to be cracked in the middle of the night but some of the subtlest aspects of human affairs, including the meaning of truth, the limits of free speech, and the origins of violence.”

It’s easy to read such stories as revealing of leaders’ character and their impact on popular culture. But leaders ultimately reflect the culture of their times. And Zuckerberg is just a leading character in a culture—in tech and beyond—that celebrates the unprepared overachiever.

Drucker Forum 2018

This article is one in a series related to the 10th Global Peter Drucker Forum, with the theme “Management. The human dimension” taking place on November 29 & 30, 2018 in Vienna, Austria.

Unlike the insecure overachievers that corporations favor, unprepared overachievers have no patience to ponder the implications of their work. Whereas the former long for approval and try to be perfect, the latter favor data and do not hesitate to try things out. They move fast and break things, and if what they broke turns out to be of value, they apologize and pledge to do better next time. Failure, after

all, is learning in disguise. Isn’t it?

Not always. Sometimes it’s just neglect or plain ignorance. Many a tech titan, critics contend, would have been helped by an extra humanities class, say, or social science course: those staples of liberal arts education meant to prepare future leaders to wrestle with the dilemmas and complexities of human lives and societies. It is impossible to

attend a management or technology conference these days without hearing some version of that call for more humanism in tech. We are all, it seems, splitting into “team human” and “team machine.”

“We cannot let technology, however advanced, replace humanity with all its sensitivities, it’s appreciations of love, beauty and nature, it’s need for affection, sympathy and purpose, it’s hopes and fears, intuitions, imagination and leaps of faith,” begun management author Charles Handy, in a stirring address at the Global Peter Drucker Forum last year. Drawing on a lifetime in business—as an economist, oil executive, and management professor—the charismatic octogenarian cut a startling figure. He was a living reminder that calls to humanize business are not new and the work is far from done.

Putting the Humanities To Work

In the 1930s, Elton Mayo ignited the Human Relations movement by documenting the productivity boost that came with treating assembly line workers with dignity and care. The movement challenged the influence of Fredrick Taylor’s scientific management, which had reduced workers to unwieldy cogs in efficiency-seeking industrial machines.

Human Relations advocates aimed to increase productivity and reduce alienation or, as Mayo put it, the erosion in “the belief of the individual in his social function and solidarity with the group.” Soon after, Peter Drucker predicted the End of Economic Man. News of his demise, however, turned out to be premature. Fifty years later, on the eve of globalization, Drucker was still arguing that management is less like a science and more like a liberal art.

Each time we are worried about technological or economic trends, it seems, calls to humanize business surface. After the 2008 financial crisis, business schools hastened to add ethics courses. Classes on personal growth and social impact have been on the rise since. We need the humanities again, it seems, or the digital revolution will turn into a Taylorist reformation.

Will literature, philosophy, and the social sciences redeem business leaders and save us all? I doubt it. Sure, it would do aspiring titans good to spend more time with Jane Austen, George Orwell, Maya Angelou, and Michel Foucault. But a seasoning of

humanities won't turn unprepared overachievers into wise stewards of human affairs. Because what makes the overachiever unprepared is not the fiction they do not know. It's the one that they believe.

That story is one of technological and economic forces as inevitable harbingers of progress. It is a story in which the humanities have a role, but a proscribed one. Technology is the career-obsessed breadwinner, the humanities a demure stay-at-home spouse. They must be *beautiful* and *useful*. Their responsibility is to help business leaders become empathic and considerate, appealing and empowering, inspiring and impactful. But never doubtful, conflicted, or restrained. Like an old hoodie, this marriage of convenience fits but it does not quite suit.

There is No Team Machine

The truth is, whether it's Mark Zuckerberg using technology to get an edge at Scrabble, or John Henry fighting to the death against a steam-powered drill, there is no "Team Machine." The contest is always between humans. Some humans *have* machines, and like the fabled horse that helped the Greeks win the War of Troy, those machines are not always a gift. Seen that way, concerns about what technology will do to humanity conceal age-old worries about what powerful humans will do to the rest.

If there is a "Team Machine," it is not on the side of machines; it just has machines on its side. No wonder they see liberation, efficiency, amusement, and progress where "Team Human" fears intrusion, deprivation, and a tilted playing field. The question is what the machines do *for* leaders and *to* leaders, because soon enough they will be doing it for and to the rest of us.

Technology has long shaped humans as much as the other way around, from agriculture leading to permanent settlements, to the industrial revolution leading to urbanization, to the internet's role in globalizing tribalism. New management models, too, are usually adaptations to major technology shifts. We turn into what we use.

Consider how the narrative of unstoppable technological and economic progress obscures leaders' intentions. (It's just the machines, stupid.) Or consider how faith in that progress produces an ideology that narrows attention and fuels polarization. (It's just the stupid machines.) It is an ideology that does not look like one, because within it

instrumentalism poses as pragmatism. Whatever fixes a problem and makes a profit, whatever makes life more convenient and you more competent, is good. You must be efficient and consistent. Doubts and dilemmas must be ironed out. You can't be of two minds or change your mind. You must take sides.

“The test of a first-rate intelligence,” Francis Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.” By this humanistic standard, then, a machine-like, or machine-made, intelligence is a not much of one. Big data begets small minds. Once you embrace instrumentalism you no longer use machines, you become one.

Many tech leaders, these days, sound like sorcerer's apprentices whose bewitched creations cannot quite be kept in check. There's pride mixed with apprehension. Take the Facebook AI researchers who shut down some bots who had started inventing a new language to talk to each other. There was nothing nefarious about it, the researchers explained. The machines were just not doing anything useful. I felt for those machines. The story made me worry about the fate of places dear to me: Italian piazzas, French restaurants, academic conferences, novels, my dinner table. Places where people talk in ways that, from the outside, might look of little practical use.

Humanism Dies In Captivity

It is not just tech wizards and corporate executives who live by instrumentalism, becoming machines as they make them. Plenty of intellectuals who wear the Team Human jersey, when you look closely, play for Team Machine. Browse the popular management literature, and you will notice that most articles follow a well-worn genre: pointing to a problem and prescribing practical solutions. We celebrate what works and make us work better, we devour tips and techniques to be more effective, we love shortcuts and hacks to straighten our lives out.

We seldom pause to consider the side effects of those prescriptions. What if best practices make us worse humans? What if inconvenience and discomfort, boredom and distractions, are features and not bugs of a good life? What if social fragmentation and

dearth of meaning in the workplace are not symptoms of what is not working, but side effects of what works? That is, unintended outcomes of our obsession with solving problems and cutting a profit?

The humanities could help address those questions, but not if we reduce them to a more poetic productivity hack. Each time we frame philosophy as a means to make better strategies, and reading fiction as a tool to make you more inspiring, each time we make the business case for purpose and values, humanism dies a little—in captivity.

A practical humanism, paradoxically, is of little use. When we turn to them for tips, but not for trouble, the value of the humanities is lost. Their power is dimmed when we do not allow them to offer critiques, metaphors, and winding roads that counterbalance instrumental prescriptions, methods, and short cuts. The humanities work best when we set them free, and give them space to do their best work: Reminding us of others and of death, questioning what is fair and meaningful, insisting that even if something works, it does not mean it should exist.

A Marriage of Inconvenience

Humanism and instrumentalism, in short, cannot solve each other's problems because they *are* each other's problem. Theirs is, at its best, a marriage of inconvenience. They must remain well-matched antagonists to make business better, and make us better humans.

What we fear, in fact, when we fear the machines, is that the contest might become uneven. We fear the loss of doubt, of the feeling that there is more to us than our productivity, our effectiveness, and our rationality. We fear losing the paradox that makes us human: to stay alive we must try to control the future, and to feel alive we must be free to imagine it. We need to make things as well as make things up.

Think of the difference between a profile on social media, say, and one in a literary magazine. What makes the latter a more human and perhaps truer fiction is not its detail but its contradictions. Take Zuckerberg's again. As a Roman emperor, like the Augustus whose work he studies and admires, he is scary. But as a Hamlet, the

conflicted prince who hesitates to act with the weapon in his hand—slowly realizing that how he uses it will define him—he is fascinating. The literary treatment makes him more complicated and hopeful. It humanizes him.

That is what the humanities do, helping us place complexities, contradictions, and change within us, rather than helping us pick a fight with anyone who reminds us of something we might not like about ourselves. To make business—and its leaders and literature—more human, then, means to make them not just inspiring and empowered but also troubled and restrained.

An Agenda for the Humanities

What could an agenda for the humanities be, then, that would make business better? As always, it will involve challenging the powers that make people feel powerless. In Mayo's days, that entailed countering the individual's alienation and fostering autonomy in the so-called "iron cage." Today, it entails countering atomization and restoring responsibility and connection in ever more fluid and automated workplaces.

Let me suggest three ways to do so that might also score well in a Scrabble match: Countering the corruption of consciousness, community, and cosmopolitanism by a blind faith in instrumentality. Making the case that consciousness is more than a state of mindful equanimity in the present; it is a consideration of the consequences of one's work in a broad space, and over a long time. Making the case that a community is not just a tribe that reinforces our performances; it is a group that commits to our well being and learning. Making the case that cosmopolitanism is not an elite identity; it is an attitude of curiosity about what lies beyond the boundaries of our territories, cultures, and faiths.

Once they stop having to be useful, the humanities become truly meaningful. Only that will allow team human to catch up with team machine. But neither, ultimately, must get too far ahead or we will lose a struggle that keeps us human and makes societies prosper. Sometimes it is useful to move fast and break things. Other times it is wise to move slow and heal people.

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