

LEADING YOUR TOTAL LIFE THE PETER DRUCKER WAY

by Bruce Rosenstein

The people who can maintain balance and gain fulfillment in this troubled economic and social era will lead a diversified, multifaceted life, and according to Peter Drucker, “live in more than one world.” In this 100th anniversary year of Drucker’s birth, it is even more crucial now to look for inspiration and wisdom from his life and work as a writer, consultant, and professor during a remarkable career of more than 70 years.

During an interview conducted at the Drucker-Ito School in Claremont, California, on April 11, 2005, Drucker responded to one of my questions with a concept that became the cornerstone of the book I have written about him, *Living in More Than One World: How Peter Drucker’s Wisdom Can Inspire and Transform Your Life*. This was well before the stock market collapse and economic meltdown that has affected so many of us, yet it was prescient advice that holds for both good and bad times. As I listened and concentrated on what he was saying to me about the importance of living a multidimensional life, I suddenly thought of a phrase that seemed to describe it: “total life.” I followed up with, “What I think I’m hearing from you, at least partially, is that one needs to look at one’s total life, one’s family, friends, one’s various organizations, and perhaps not be too focused on any one thing.”

Drucker’s response was deceptively simple, and profound: “The—I wouldn’t say happy people—but satisfied, contented people I knew were people that lived in more than one world. Those single-minded people—you meet them most in politics—in the end are very unhappy people.” He made suggestions in his books and articles over the years

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on how knowledge workers could lead more fulfilling lives of meaning and purpose, though he tended to leave the details up to them. His writing about the personal and professional development of the individual knowledge worker covered more than 50 years; however, he never devoted a complete book to the subject. I decided that it was necessary to erect a framework around Drucker's work on the individual, one that would be actionable and practical and start people on the work of living in more than one world, based on Drucker's principles and teaching.

Five Roads Leading to Satisfaction and Contentment

We can think of approaching this multidimensional life in five areas, all based on Drucker's life and thought:

1. Designing your diversified life by considering where you are now personally and professionally, and where you'd like to be in the future.
2. Getting the most out of your core competencies, the things you do with a sense of achievement and excellence.
3. Creating your future through planning second careers and parallel careers.
4. Exercising your sense of generosity through such areas as volunteering, social entrepreneurship, mentoring, and similar activities.
5. Building continuous, lifelong learning into your life, while possibly devoting some time to teaching.

The personal document for making the most of the five components is the Total Life List, the tool I devised to organize these areas of your life (see sidebar). By filling out and updating a list revolving around the 14 sections of life on the list, you will have a snapshot of not only your current situation, but also directions in which you'd

TOTAL LIFE LIST

Make a list (on paper or computer, as simple or elaborate as you choose) of the people and activities that comprise your life now, and what you'd like to aim for in the future, using the following categories:

1. Immediate family (current and future)
 2. Extended family (current and future)
 3. Closer work colleagues (people you interact with most often in the workplace)
 4. Friends (current and future goals)
 5. People in your various professional networks (current and future goals)
 6. Various places of current employment and (briefly) what your work entails (current and future goals)
 7. Professional affiliations and associations (current and future goals)
 8. Ongoing learning activities (current and future goals)
 9. Teaching (if any) (current and future goals)
 10. Volunteer activities (current and future goals)
 11. Work with nonprofit organizations, or social entrepreneurship (current and future goals)
 12. Mentoring (current and future goals)
 13. Outside interests of all types, including areas such as sports leagues, amateur interest societies, religious/spiritual activities or study, book groups, or creative areas such as writing, art, or playing music (current and future goals)
 14. Exercise and other mind-body activities (current and future goals)
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like to move. The list will help you to think holistically about your life, because it guides you to consider not just your own needs and goals, but those of your family, friends, work colleagues, and people in your various professional networks. You can start on it all at once, or fill it out gradually. It will ideally be a living, changing document that you refer to on a regular basis.

As you complete the list, you may be surprised at how busy and complex your life really is. Although Drucker noted that one of the main benefits of living in more than one world was to cushion the blows of personal and professional setbacks, the idea goes further. As you meet and interact with more people, especially those who come from different walks of life and different professions, you may discover talents you never suspected you had. But you must approach this with eyes wide open and consider potential trade-offs and drawbacks: you may have difficulty finding the time to add new areas to your life and devoting sufficient time to them once they've been added. More people are competing for your time and attention. There may be expense involved, especially in areas such as ongoing learning. It's possible that you will earn more money—especially if you add a parallel career—but you could possibly earn less if you don't concentrate completely on one career.

Advantages of a Multidimensional Life

Among the tangible advantages of building a life of multiple dimensions are:

- You live more fully in the present moment, though you can prepare for the future, without

being obsessed by it. You'll have less time to ruminate on your past, with its mistakes and regrets.

- As you become more multifaceted, you develop and strengthen your sense of purpose and meaning, and work toward more personal fulfillment.
- Your focus is not purely on yourself, but also on making a positive difference in the lives of other people.
- And, importantly, you're not likely to become bored too often!

A key to living in this manner is to not be overly consumed with your work responsibilities, as important as they are. In 1952, Drucker wrote a delightful article for *Fortune* magazine, "How to Be an Employee," which was reprinted 25 years later in the book *People and Performance: The Best of Peter Drucker on Management*. "But it is important in this 'employee society' of ours," he cautions, "to have a genuine interest outside the job and to be serious about it." The scope of outside interests is wider than it was 57 years ago, yet work hours have also expanded, as has the pressure to produce more each day. As technology can tether us to a job, it is up to the individual knowledge worker to find time for these outside activities.

These outside activities also relate to a key part of Drucker's teachings: that the really important things that affect you—especially in the future—tend to originate outside your workplace. You have to get beyond your four walls to see how other people think and act,

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and what is important to them. You'll meet and interact with people who may see the world differently from you. The idea of how to manage time and consider your priorities is also crucial in this realm.

Hints for Creating Your List

As you create and add to your list based on the five areas above, you can benefit from tips to get the most out of the exercise. For teaching, category 9, one way to get you thinking in a structured way about pursuing teaching opportunities is to prepare a "guest lecture," in a Microsoft Word document, PowerPoint, or some other organized format, based on the work you do, for an imagined course on the subject. For instance, if you are a manager, think of it as being for a general management course, but focusing on the specific work you accomplish and direct in your workplace. If you were to be speaking for 15 to 30 minutes (or longer, if you prefer), what specific things would you tell the students about how you accomplish your work? See if you can add a segment about the information you require to do your job most effectively.

In the area of exercising your generosity (point 4), you can get the most out of the Total Life List by going beyond the obvious categories of volunteer activities (category 10), nonprofit organizations and social entrepreneurship (category 11), and mentoring (category 12) to consider other opportunities. Think of ways to involve some of the other categories, and the people within those categories, in these areas of generosity. For instance, in the first five categories, which include family members, colleagues, friends, and people in your network, think of ways to involve some of these people in your volunteering or other nonprofit activities. Some families volunteer as a group. Think about organizing or joining something group-related at your workplace or within one of your professional associations.

In professional affiliations and associations (category 7), there are numerous opportunities for volunteerism, as many of these groups have ongoing needs for people to organize professional development events, annual conferences, and so on. Within category 9,

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teaching, you may find opportunities for volunteerism, or ideas for starting a social entrepreneurship venture, as Wendy Kopp did so successfully with Teach For America. In the spiritual/religious area (a segment of category 13), there are numerous opportunities for volunteerism, mentorship, social entrepreneurship, and servant leadership.

Questions and Answers

A distinctive feature of Drucker's consulting style was to ask penetrating, yet sometimes deceptively simple, questions designed to elicit well-thought-out responses. You can apply this approach by asking yourself questions about areas in your life and considering the answers as they affect not just you personally, but other stakeholders, such as immediate family members, friends, and coworkers. You may even want to broaden your scope to consider the effects on your community or even beyond. For example, when deciding how to become a more multidimensional person, ask yourself if you could contact a mentor or friend who could give you ideas, based on their experience, on how to add more dimensions to your life. In addition, ask yourself whom you could contact to offer your assistance in helping that person define his or her own life goals or priorities. In helping someone else, you'll also be helping yourself by framing the proper questions in your mind. This exercise is directly related to Drucker's own life. In an interview in 2005, he told me, "My order of priorities is: writing comes first, teaching next, and consulting last." But priorities were not static in his

life. When I interviewed him three years earlier for a feature story in *USA Today*, he said, “If you want to diagram my work, in the center is writing, then comes consulting, then comes teaching. I’ve never been primarily an academic. I like to teach because that’s the way I learn.”

One of Drucker’s rules of priority setting, from the 1967 book *The Effective Executive*, was to aim high within your professional priorities, at an activity that will make a difference. Ask yourself if you have ever considered the various areas of your life and then prioritized them as Drucker did for his own. Related to that, ask yourself when was the last time you aimed high, at something that would make a difference, and consider what happened as a result. If it wasn’t the result you intended, what did you do about it?

Getting the Most Out of Your Core Competencies

Although Drucker and others (including the authors who coined the term, Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad) have used core competencies in the organizational sense, it is now increasingly common to see them applied to the individual. Getting the most out of these competencies is important, and not always easy. Drucker regularly tapped into the power of self-reflection, and recommended that others do the same. During our 2005 interview, Drucker told me, “I think a more important lesson I’ve learned is that I need to look back every year on the results of the year and hold them against my expectations.”

Building on this, consider these possible steps for self-reflection. You might want to tie it into the annual self-assessment you do for your workplace’s performance review.

- Consider the plans you made a year ago, and what happened as a result.
- Think about what worked during the year and what didn’t.
- Try to determine where the opportunities are, based on this information.

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- Take this information and map out a plan for the coming year.

Creating Your Future

You can’t predict the future. But in Drucker’s 2008 book *Management: Revised Edition* (with Joseph A. Maciariello), Drucker makes a profound statement: “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.” You can start creating your future today by starting a parallel career, or moving into a second career. This is especially crucial in today’s economic environment, when we have less control over our jobs, and few of us have true job security. Teaching may be an ideal parallel career for many knowledge workers, as well as a second career. Drucker addressed this topic in a fascinating interview for *Psychology Today* in 1968. “The older professions,” he said, “are best suited to become second careers. Middle age is really the best time to switch to being the lawyer, the teacher, the priest, the doctor—I shocked you—and the social worker.” Whether or not you are approaching second careers in middle age, that list of professions is not a bad starting point to think about potential second careers.

Your Ongoing Journey

Living in more than one world will not happen all at once. Think of it as an ongoing journey. It will require considerable thought and self-reflection. None of this is easy. We can take comfort knowing that it wasn’t even

easy for Drucker himself. He told me that for most of his life, he would take time in the summer to think about the successes and failures of the previous year, and “every year I’m surprised. Every year the things that worked are not the things I expected to work. And the things I expected to work are at best not failures. And every year I redirect my priorities as a result of that test and a year later find out that I have not lived up to my priorities but have done something quite different. So, I have learned that one has to plan, but one doesn’t follow the plan.” Whenever we are tempted to feel sorry for ourselves, or lament our current situation in life, remember that even Drucker had his failures and disappointments. He persevered through them, and so can we.



Bruce Rosenstein is the author of “Living in More Than One World: How Peter Drucker’s Wisdom Can Inspire and Transform Your Life.” He worked at USA Today for 21 years and regularly wrote about business and management books for the newspaper’s Money section. He is currently a freelance journalist and a lecturer for the Catholic University School of Library and Information Science.