



Peter Drucker

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A tribute

by Tim Harle

Peter Drucker, arguably the 20th century's leading writer on business management, died on November 11 2005 at his home in Claremont, California, aged 95. Having invited comments from others, Tim Harle assesses his achievement.

The 1100-page *Financial Times Handbook of Management*, which describes itself as the State of the Art, includes a series of articles labelled Essentials. The first is entitled **Drucker, Peter**.

Born in Vienna in 1909, Drucker was educated in classics and the law. He worked as a journalist in Frankfurt and merchant banker in London before moving to the USA in 1937. The invitation to undertake a "no holds barred" study within General Motors resulted in his ground-breaking book, *Concept of the Corporation* (1946). His first Harvard Business Review (HBR) article appeared in 1950; he continued to contribute articles well into his

nineties. Over a period of 66 years he wrote over three dozen books, translated into 30 languages.

These books can be fitted into two main categories:

- i. Books on management theory and technique, which are marked by thoroughness and orderliness, and came to assume textbook status, e.g. *The Practice of Management* (1955), *Managing for Results* (1964), *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (1973)
- ii. Economic, political and social analysis – these are much more idiosyncratic and dogmatic eg *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969), *Managing for the Future* (1992) and *Post-Capitalist Society* (1993).

Drucker's Harvard editor, Nan Stone, refers to the profound historical knowledge and moral imagination he brought to his writing. The FT Handbook highlights his ability to return to first principles. Such comments begin to explain Drucker's longevity in a field noted for the consigning of once-new concepts

onto the scrap heap of management ideas.

Not that Drucker shirked pioneering work. He is credited with introducing the concept of the knowledge worker, and anticipated many trends in the use of information and its implications for organizations. In an era of increasing specialization, he could range authoritatively over the field from corporate strategy to personal development. He was instrumental in either coining or promoting such tried and tested ideas as decentralisation; satisfying the customer; sticking with the basics; and 'structure follows strategy'.

An article to mark Drucker's 95th birthday in *Forbes* magazine described him as "a religious man, albeit of a more muted Episcopalian type". The Dutch management ecologist, Peter Robertson, notes how Drucker's social, value-driven approach is very aligned to family dynamics and values. He adds, "although I can't recall he wrote about it, there may be a link with the Christian perspective". Explicit

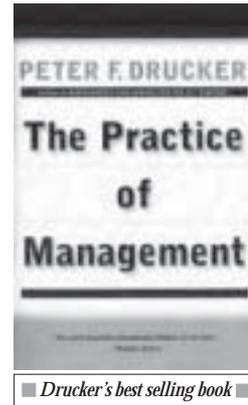
links with a Christian standpoint may be few, but Drucker's work is underpinned by a worldview which acknowledges the contribution of faith and knows something of the potential, for good and ill, of humanity.

Not that this leads Drucker into a superficial optimism. Jonathan Gosling, Director of Exeter University's Centre for Leadership Studies relates how he often refers to Drucker's observation that the 20th century produced three great leaders: Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Gosling likes this provocative reminder to beware of greatness when not attached to goodness, and especially to beware of leaders who are intent on greatness.

The reference to the 20th century's most charismatic leaders comes from *Managing the Non-Profit Organization* (1990). Describing Drucker as the doyen of writers about management, John Nelson, MODEM National Secretary, notes how helpful this book has

been, but comments that it does not contrast church and business management as starkly as some. Drucker was not one to compartmentalize his work: a 1989 HBR article was entitled, *What Business Can Learn from Nonprofits*. He sees the principles of management as universal, writing that 'there are very few, and mostly minor, differences' between managing a business, diocese, hospital, university, research lab, labour union, and governing agency.

As the titles of his books indicate, Drucker's primary emphasis was on management. He said 'Management makes an organisation out of what would otherwise be a mob' – high praise indeed! He was sceptical about the 1980s/1990s fashion for a heroic, visionary style of leadership, and in his chapter 'Leadership: More Doing than Dash' (in *Managing for the Future*) argued that good leadership gets things done, and is essentially



the same as good management.

Drucker stands in a tradition which stretches from the creation stories of the Hebrew

Bible to the incarnation of the Christian Testament, and claims relevance today. This tradition embraces the wise stewardship of resources and the common sense pragmatism of the wisdom literature, as well as the possibility of redemption (understood as deliverance from all forms of bondage) and future hope. The *Forbes* article describes how a young Christian minister sought Drucker's advice 20 years ago. The minister was Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. As mentioned in footnote 5 to Laura Nash's lecture, Warren was in the headlines himself recently when Starbucks announced they were including one of his sayings in their series of thoughts on coffee cups.

Which brings us full circle from the coffee shops of Drucker's Viennese youth. As the FT Handbook article concludes, "In the new millennium, Drucker remains worth listening to". ■

Tim Harle helps people and organisations going through change. Reflecting on his broad business experience, he also writes and speaks at business schools and theological colleges.



Peter Drucker receiving the National Medal of Freedom from President Bush in 2002 in recognition of his work in the field of management