



Review: The Effective Executive
By Peter Drucker
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It may seem odd to read and review a management book written nearly 50 years ago. *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done*, by Peter Drucker, was first published in 1967.

Indeed, I often found myself rolling my eyes at some of what Drucker wrote because times have changed so dramatically. The section on how computers were going to change management was particularly funny.

Yet, with that said, I was also struck by how cogent the book was at identifying key issues facing executives and how convincing his case was for what practices an executive should follow if he or she wishes to become “effective.” This was true both for those practices that matched my own thinking and for those that have made me rethink how I behave. As much as the world has changed since 1967, human nature hasn’t.

Of course, it also begs the question: how much of this is relevant to the nonprofit context where I’m usually engaged. Drucker mostly writes about large business institutions, although he’s quick to suggest implications for government and other large nonprofit institutions (he tends to cite hospitals as a repeated example).

In the end, I think the answer is yes: Drucker’s advice would be well worth being followed by nonprofit leaders, no matter the size of your organization.

In a nutshell, here are the ten most important lessons I took away from *The Effective Executive* that I believe apply in the nonprofit context of the 21st century.

1. The ability to “do things right” is not the same as the ability to “get the right things done.” Yet, it’s the latter that really matters. Most executives could work 24 hours a day and not run out of useful things to do for their organization. What separates the effective from ineffective executive is the effective better determines which among the various possible to-dos are the most important. And then the effective executive ruthlessly prioritizes and cuts out all discretionary tasks to focus on those that will make the biggest difference.
2. Effective executives rigorously manage their time to avoid time-wasting activities. Drucker believes that most executives are very poor at estimating how they spend their time, so he urges that they

experiment for several weeks with a time log. And based on that log, determine how they can adjust their behavior to limit those uses of time that are least valuable. Drucker believes effective executives consolidate their time so they can focus larger chunks of time (3-4 hours) on the really important, critical tasks that require sustained attention.

3. There is no one effective personality. You can be an introvert or extrovert, worrier or easy going, charming or boring, logical or intuitive. People with each of these traits can be effective or ineffective depending on whether they practice being effective. It is a learned skill that you form by habit. When hiring, personality can matter, but focus more on evidence of their effectiveness from past jobs. Since somebody can be effective in one organizational culture, but not in another, he recommends elevating an internal proven candidate to take on a new strategy or initiative rather than bringing in an outsider, whenever possible.
4. Effective executives constantly ask what they can contribute to the enterprise, not just what needs to get done. They find the intersection with the results needed and how their own individual attention can make those results happen. They don't focus on things that are really important, but where their own time won't add value. Likewise, they don't focus on things where they are uniquely able to make a difference, but the difference itself is not significant to the enterprise.
5. Effective executives limit their involvement in meetings and run those meetings tightly. That means knowing the purpose of any meeting, sharing it with the participants, keeping zealously on topic, and circling back at the end to confirm whether or not the purpose was achieved. The effective executive also realizes they can't simultaneously direct/facilitate a meeting where they also wish to actively participate with opinions. Lastly, the effective executive says no to participating in meetings where they are not essential.
6. The effective executive focuses on maximizing the value of strengths – both their own and others. They don't focus on overcoming weaknesses, which in Drucker's view, tends to yield mediocrity. The question should never be: can the person do each of the tasks necessary for the job? The question should be: Can the person do a few of the tasks necessary for the job uncommonly well? Drucker says to hire someone with one clear strength and a corresponding weakness rather than someone who is mediocre across the board. Drucker also believes employee evaluations should focus more on identifying strengths and determining how to better take advantage of strengths, as opposed to the traditional focus on overcoming weaknesses.
7. Just as an effective executive ruthlessly prioritizes time, so too he or she must constantly re-ask whether an organizational strategy should be continued or dropped, always with an eye towards how the world will look in a few years rather than today. Drucker believes thriving organizations focus on just a small handful of big strategies/initiatives rather than trying to do lots of thing. So when a new opportunity comes along, it's almost always important to simultaneously drop something too. This takes real courage since dropping an existing strategy within an organization almost always disappoints someone on staff or a stakeholder.

8. The effective executive understands that a “decision prior to implementation is just a good intention.” The decision isn’t made until someone is specifically charged with carrying out and the specific steps for implementation are identified. Action plans should be in writing and should be shared with all those who’re impacted or need to be involved.
9. Effective executives form their opinions by listening first and talking last – in particular by encouraging dissent so that opinions about the right decision are forged by understanding the best contrary arguments. In Drucker’s view, “effective decisions are not about finding consensus on facts. It’s a result of the clash and conflict of divergent opinions about competing alternatives.” That doesn’t mean facts don’t matter. But it does mean that generating the facts will not determine the outcome because the decisions that matter almost always flow from a judgment between two acceptable alternatives. Drucker urges executives to generate disagreement, even if a devil’s advocate, when facing important choices.
10. Effective executives create a culture of “we” not “I.” Their ego is always secondary to the needs of the organization and that is contagious within the organization.

In the end, I’m not sure if Drucker would highlight the same ten lessons I have. Some of the ten lessons I’ve identified match up with Drucker’s major points (a few of my lessons are the subject of entire chapters in the book), while other lessons I’ve identified involve a minor point Drucker made in passing as part of some broader issue.

Since *The Effective Executive* is relatively short (160 pages) and can be read in just a few hours, I’d encourage those who want to think hard about their own executive practices to read it for themselves.

And if you have read it and came away with different lessons than the ones I raised, I’d welcome the feedback.

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