

Leonardo: The First Consultant

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By Andrew Sobel

Leonardo Da Vinci was arguably the first management consultant in history, and we can learn a lot from his story.

Developing into a "deep generalist" is a fundamental part of the journey to becoming a trusted advisor to senior executives. One of the most accomplished deep generalists in history was Leonardo Da Vinci. Arguably, he was history's first management consultant. In this newsletter, I want to share with you some of the details about Leonardo's life and career that make him such an exemplar for modern professionals. Checklists of tactics and techniques are useful, but once in a while it's rewarding to look at some of the great minds in history.

By the way, it's proper to call him "Leonardo" not "Da Vinci." Da Vinci means "from Vinci" – it is not a name, it is a prepositional phrase. It would be like calling William of Orange "of Orange" or listing Lawrence of Arabia in the phone book as "of Arabia, Mr. L." We also refer to other renaissance artists by their first names – Raphael, Michelangelo, and so on. If you are at a cocktail party with a tenured professor of Renaissance art, I want you to cut a "bella figura" (literally, "beautiful figure," meaning to look good or to look sharp in public) not a "brutta figura."

In 1481, at the age of thirty, the Italian artist Leonardo Da Vinci left Florence and moved to Milan in search of a client. While living in Florence, he had completed his apprenticeship to Andrea Verrocchio and established his early reputation as a brilliant and original painter. Florence had an abundance of artistic talent, however, and the competition for clients – wealthy rulers or noblemen who could afford to give out commissions for works of art – was intense. In Milan, Florence's artistic resources, so Leonardo headed to a city where he had a greater chance of establishing his own base of loyal patrons.

When Leonardo arrived in Milan, he brought with him a rare lute he had constructed in the shape of a horse's head (in addition to being an accomplished painter, he was also a highly skilled lutenist). Milanese high society was apparently quite taken by his musical talents and his unusual instrument, and the social contacts he developed as a result of his hobnobbing – not unlike some modern consultants or bankers – turned out to be instrumental in procuring art commissions.

Eyeing his ideal client, Leonardo drafted a letter offering his services to the Milanese ruler Ludovico Sforza: "I offer to execute, at your convenience, all of the items briefly noted below." The extraordinary list consists almost entirely of descriptions of innovative military inventions that could be put at Sforza's service. "I have a model of very strong but light bridges, extremely easy to carry? During a siege, I know how to dry up the water of the moats... I have models of mortars that are easy to transport? I will make covered vehicles, safe and unassailable, which will penetrate enemy ranks..." and so on. The list is amazingly prescient – it describes many military inventions that didn't come into mainstream use until centuries later.

Why did Leonardo, an artist who had no particular experience in designing or building weapons, position himself to Sforza as a military engineer? The answer is quite simple: 1482 saw most of the Italian city-states on a war footing – the Turks had invaded southern Italy, and Venice had hired Swiss mercenaries and was threatening Milan. Sforza was being inexorably drawn into the conflict. Leonardo, no slouch, was adjusting his service offering to his client's presumed needs at the time. Sforza needed ideas about how to wage war, not altarpieces with depictions of the Virgin Mary. The ever-creative

Leonardo emphasized his inventive engineering skills rather than his artistic abilities.

Great client advisors have both depth and breadth, and Leonardo Da Vinci was an example of a consummate deep generalist. An illegitimate child who grew up in a small town in Tuscany, Leonardo had virtually no formal education. When he was brought to Florence and apprenticed to Verrochio at age 15, he knew nothing of Latin and probably could barely read. Although he lacked education, Leonardo rarely failed to master whatever discipline or task he set himself to. At his death, he had become one of the most accomplished artists in history. He had designed, hundreds of inventions, including a water-powered alarm clock, a parachute, a variable-intensity table lamp, and a helicopter—all of them well before their time. He wrote, "The desire to know is natural to good men."

Leonard exemplified an important trait of great learners—he got his hands dirty! He valued practical, hands-on learning rather than academic study, perhaps a reaction to the fact that he found himself keeping company with highly literate renaissance scholars who quoted left and right from recently rediscovered Greek and Latin texts. He wrote, "Anyone who invokes authors in a discussion is not using his intelligence but his memory." His studies of human anatomy, for example, are based on hundreds of hours spent dissecting corpses—not a common activity in Renaissance Italy!

Not surprisingly, many of the modern professionals I have interviewed talk about the need to get deeply involved with the nuts and bolts of your relationships, no matter how senior you are, in order to experience the client's situation and issues first hand. Former General Electric chief executive Jack Welch calls it "diving deep"—he once spent an entire week with Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton at, for example, in an effort to understand why his retail chain was so successful. President Abraham Lincoln, as a young lawyer, similarly "dived deep" by riding the 8th judicial circuit for three months each year across the state of Illinois. He traveled by horse with a judge and other lawyers, working with clients in dozens of small towns across 11,000 square miles of rural countryside. Despite the hardship—sometimes Lincoln would sleep in a hotel with a dozen other men—he accumulated a wealth of practical experience and knowledge through his exposure to so many different clients and legal issues, most of which had to be resolved in a few days. Getting his hands dirty yielded another benefit: he built relationships with thousands of voters who later supported his political career.

Leonardo put great emphasis on inventiveness, which, according to some historians, explains why he actually painted so few works. Writes one biographer, "He was incapable of repeating what had already been done by someone else, and only took up his brushes once a revolution in the mind had been accomplished." He developed a innovative technique in his early paintings, for example, that involved carefully applying many fine layers of thin paint over a primed surface, resulting in a mysterious luminosity created by the light as it passed through the surface layers and was reflected back. When he painted the famous Last Supper, he completely broke with convention, and instead of placing Judas off to the side without a halo (the custom among renaissance painters), he placed him close to Christ and on the right, differentiating him with nuances of expression and shadow.

Even in his sixties, near the end of his life, Leonardo was busy studying new areas of science, and cooking up more projects than ever—one of his last proposed inventions was a huge parabolic mirror that could be used to harness solar power in the dying of textiles.

Although Leonardo was clearly born with innate genius, his learning habits—which anyone can emulate—are very relevant to modern professionals.

My question to you is, What is on your learning agenda for 2008?

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