

Reclaiming Conversation for Thinking

In December 2015 we attended the [7th Global Drucker Forum](#) in Vienna. The theme was *Claiming Our Humanity – Managing in the Digital Age*. Most panel discussions focused on the idea of a paradigm shift being brought about by rapid technological developments.

This new way of thinking about connections between people, about human interactions, and about human conditions is requiring that workers create value with their minds and directs attention to the need to understand people and how they relate to work.

The second best panel in our opinion, *Humans First – Technology Second (Day 2: Plenary 6)*, discussed three key elements of humanity that no machine can ever replace.



The first is the **ability for self-reflection**. This demands time and space, something that senior executives, especially CEOs, seemed to lack in this period of rapid changes in interconnectedness. This reminds us of a point made by [Professor Robert Kegan](#) of Harvard University:

“Reflective thinking requires a mental ‘place’ to stand apart from, or outside of, a durably created idea, thought, fact or description.” [1]

Sherry Turkle, one of the speakers who has recently published *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, highlighted the importance of solitude. This is when one can potentially learn to think for oneself and develop a stable sense of self.

In other (metaphorical) words, ‘a room of one’s own’, as Virginia Woolf put in 1928, is needed because, without this, “those seas would be unsailed and those fertile lands a desert” [2]. This is a space where we can exercise our minds and hear the dialogue of “me with myself”, in the words of Hannah Arendt, one of the most original thinkers. This room is key and is becoming of greater importance and urgency.

The other two elements, **to put yourself in the place of the other** and **to encourage good conversations**, brought to our mind some wise words from Arendt. Although writing about totalitarianism, her insights resonates with much of what was discussed during the Forum.

Thinking from the perspective of the word *empathy* [3] during the Forum, but we prefer Arendt’s image of ‘training the imagination to go visiting the standpoint of others’, which is about asking yourself how the world would look if you saw it from a different position. Whilst visiting promotes understanding, empathy may obstruct it, according to Arendt:



“By empathizing with another, I erase all difference. But when I visit another place, I experience the disorientation that lets me understand just how different the world looks from different perspectives [4]”.

But visiting requires ‘thinking without banisters’, as she put it, that is, thinking without “categories and formulas that are deeply ingrained in our mind but whose basis of experience has long been forgotten” [5]. The more you visit, the more representative your opinion will be.

Visiting, therefore, is not about consensus or agreeing with another’s opinion. Rather, it is about plurality, about understanding the diversity of people. As a result, you will move towards an ‘enlarged mentality’ with development in the quality of conversations and interactions with people.

Arendt’s ideas would seem to be needed more than ever when, according to Sherry Turkle, **82% of Americans have used their smartphones during social interactions**, there has been a 40% decline of empathy among college students in the last twenty years, or when **87% of workforce is not engaged in work**, as Jim Keane pointed out in the following panel ([Plenary 7](#)).

The Forum made it clear that it is time for people to give themselves time-space to think, to reclaim conversations, and to tighten the ‘visiting’ gap.

[1] Kegan, Robert (1996) ‘Neither “Safe Sex” Nor “Abstinence May Work – Now What? Toward a Third Norm for Youthful Sexuality’. In Sicchetti, Dante and Toth, Sheree L. *Rochester Symposium on Developmental Psychology Volume 7 Adolescence: Opportunities and Challenges*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

[2] Virginia Woolf (1928) *A Room of One’s Own*. Penguin Classics.

[3] Check the [Lady Geek 2015 Global Empathy Index](#) to see Which companies are considered best at empathy.

[4] and [5] Arendt in Disch, Lisa J. (1993) ‘More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt’. *Political Theory*, Volume 21, No.4, p.665-694.