

On Violence, Assault on HR Managers and Maruti Suzuki

HR Managers, their associations, Unions and Journalists have written volumes about the latest Maruti Suzuki case of violence leading to death of their HR Manager. Petitions have been circulated, signature campaigns done and interviews were given on TV shows by all concerned.

So you might ask me, "Do I have anything new to tell the world?"

Sure, Sir. A valid question! The answer is that I have experienced violence first hand and not watched from side-lines. [Several Personnel Managers were assaulted in yesteryears - why are they silent?] Here is an experience and my conclusions, no doubt personal conclusions they are, presented to you which, I hope will, provide a different perspective on the issues at micro level.

Nobody [usually] hits another employee without being 'instructed'!

There are reasons for this behaviour. Let us understand that workers are not a different breed. They behave not-too-differently from managers. They would not touch any fellow manager or employee. But when they are told that they are fighting the larger cause of workers' benefit, the situation changes. The attitude changes.

Following the strike at our plant, I was assaulted inside Labour Court building at Thane in May 1986 as I was running to save myself from assailants and entered the office of Mr Muzumdar, Presiding Officer of Labour Court. The assailant hit me while I was inside his chamber. Fortunately it was only a hard blow without any weapon, but resulting in eye injury that required two days of hospitalization. Who hit me? Was it anybody from my organization? No they were not. I had seen the assailants, they were not our employees. The assailants were hired from a certain 'Shakha.' How did I know? Sir, if you are doing a plant job, you develop your own network which feeds you with remarkably accurate information. Trust me. At least a dozen veterans of seventies and eighties will readily testify!

Like any Plant Personnel Manager I had my friends among workmen. Many of them called me up at home, felt concerned about the assault. These were not crocodile tears.

Then what explains the assault? It is easy [and I know this to be true!], it was arranged by non-workmen among the union office-bearers.

In another case where a workman assaulted the Factory Manager, the enquiry was completed after three years, and the workman was about to be dismissed. At this juncture the workman took an unusual step. He approached the Factory Manager at his home, confessed his wrong-doing, asked for pardon and explained how as a young man he was 'instructed' to assault.

I would like to believe that an ordinary workman is prone to be misguided like any other young man. In Maruti Suzuki there were plenty of young men who could be misguided particularly in the light of the strikes of 2011 in the same factory, and when emotions were running high on an issue.

The point I wish to make is that this is, in my opinion, more a work of external agents than spontaneous reaction of workmen. And I also would like to say that instigation by external

agents does not mitigate the offence of killing Awanish. Those who killed Awanish must be punished, but punish we must those who instigated it.

The powerless is a sitting duck in a conflict; the real leader must come in the forefront.

The local Maruti management is perceived as helpless bystander, notwithstanding its MD who is Japanese. It is widely believed that when Maruti management was negotiating with workers in the previous strike, they had to take instructions constantly through video conferencing from their HQ in Japan. Their HQ actually made press statements about the strike. It is believed that the local management, following the 2011 strike, was perceived as a powerless entity and a puppet in the hands of HQ, by workmen.

What happens when a powerless tries to show ‘who is in control.’ He invites great apathy and anger.

This coupled with the fact that the MD of Maruti Suzuki made statements that showed that the organization believed in ‘controlling’ workmen [see my blog post: <http://hresonance.blogspot.in/2012/01/maruti-suzuki-arrogance-of-success.html>] and their unions can only enrage an ‘adversary.’ Nobody wants to lose control of the workplace. The Japanese elsewhere had shown that they had gone a long way to build relations. But not in Maruti Suzuki.

It takes enormous energy and a strong will to rebuild relations.

Did you ever read about any specific efforts of Maruti Suzuki of building bridges with employees or workers in particular after the 2011 strikes? The press was covering Maruti story constantly and watching it like a doctor watches a patient in ICU; they never reported any positive step. It would have made an excellent story of ‘let bygones be bygones.’ It could have served as a model for other employers. But the press savvy Maruti never took that step. What will you say about an organization that experiences turmoil but does not address the sentient issues concerning it? Will you say that it is culpable? Yes Sir, in my eyes it surely is.

Let me also give you an extreme story. But one that shows the way. When some employees made very adverse remarks in employee engagement survey about a Director of a management institute at Pune, he took a step which might read shocking and unbelievable, but I can swear that it is true. The Director [for whom many of his students are willing to die] actually prostrated before those employees and said something to this effect ‘I have a vision of creating this as one of the greatest institutions; I might have gone wrong in some ways and hurt you, please pardon me. But please be with me in my journey, I need your support.’ I repeat that this is a true story.

I am not suggesting that we go to the extreme to which the Director went. But we have to appreciate that it takes open heart and mind to make a proactive step to rebuild relations.

Building relations, this example tells us, requires exposing yourself. We know that it is ‘disclosures’ or an open admission of feelings, acknowledgement of failures that go a long way in building relations, particularly in re-building relations. Rebuilding is possible if we drop ourselves and show that we are, like the other party, very fallible.

Building sensitivity to people issues within organisation requires a determined effort, a concerted effort. Very often with the emotions running high among fellow managers, the task of an HR Manager to re-build sensitivity and relations is next to impossible if the top

management does not effectively champion it. While remarks of the Toyota Kirloskar MD [see my blog-post mentioned above] show that the organisation had done collective introspection, there is nothing to that effect in Maruti Suzuki.

Do we want to fight battles, win war against external unions and impose employer-sponsored internal unions? Or do we want to take employees with us on the journey to fulfil the mission? These are the questions to be answered. The textile mill owners in Mumbai and Maruti Suzuki in Manesar unfortunately provided a common answer in their actions.

Even if the Government does not amend the Contract Labour Act, can we proactively define policies for engagement of contract labour in our organisations?

The fact is that HR managers do not give contracts or control award of contract for certain jobs. Contractors are appointed by line managers and the HR managers have often bad case on their hand. In many organisations both contract workers and permanent workers work on the same jobs. Instances are not unknown when they work in shifts relieving each other. Such situations arise because there are no stance taken at organisational level on when and where to appoint contract labour and otherwise. The solution lies in developing and communicating an internal policy on the issue of employment of contract labour.

Very often the employees [managers included] respond to fairness and not so much to 'legalities' because some cases can be obvious breach of law but in many instances are 'arguable' cases. Even unions are aware of it. There are unions [in the principle employer's establishment] which have brought about settlement between a contractor and his employees to secure better service conditions. They know that contract labour is required for an organisation in certain cases and there is no point in taking a very dogmatic view. Go to Pune, the new industrial manufacturing hub, if you want to see some such settlements.

The problem is that if we want to retain our influence over our employees, we will have to loosen control.

And that does not come easily to some employers. That is my take on this unfortunate episode.

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<http://hresonance.blogspot.in/2012/01/maruti-suzuki-arrogance-of-success.html>