

When Ashish invited me to address this meet, I asked him what subject I should be speaking on. He did not specify anything in particular and that actually suits me.

If you ask me what the subject is, I can only say that it is all about things I always felt very acutely about.

I would like to go back to seventies when we joined the industry. The word industrial relations actually meant industrial dispute. Every IR professional talked about enquiries, charge sheets, court decisions, strikes and lock outs. The situation was so adversarial that if someone were to predict that this will change beyond recognition when you retire, I would have dispatched the person straight to mental asylum. But the fact is that employer-employee relationship has changed, and yes it is today more 'contribution focused' than 'conflict focused.' Even then we must not mistake 'silence' for 'peace'.

But the new situation certainly has brought opportunities in its wake. There is a greater realisation that the real monster is competition and that can finish the organisation itself, that is to say, both employer and employees alike. Hence the focus on contribution; it is forced by situation. Since contribution can be maximised if we have strong employee relations, so it is time to focus on and build 'relations.' I would personally like to hear that we must build relations because 'you are part of my team or organisation' rather than giving the reason of improving contribution. But be that as it may, sometimes a good deed is welcome even if it is for a wrong reason.

In any relationship we place greater value on common objective. Toyota has understood this very well. It says in their book 'The Toyota Culture' [and I am quoting from the book now] *"If the company does have a labour union, both should recognise that the prosperity of the company is the common objective and both must use thorough communication in order to resolve any differences of opinions and build a relationship of mutual trust."* [unquote]

This is a very good statement and we must complement Toyota for stating it upfront. The logic behind this approach is unmistakable. The problem is always in implementation. We have seen that many organisations paid fat bonuses in spite of the organisation making losses. There are many such ways in which mutual trust is sacrificed. So does the employee believe in statements made in Toyota style? No way. He says 'Does organisation subscribe to my prosperity? You are making

no statement about it.' Our argument as HR Managers predictably is that your prosperity is the result of the organisation's prosperity. I too may have answered this question in similar way but I have always felt that I have not understood employees' viewpoint.

The employees' mindset is difficult to understand because we have never made efforts to understand it. We have never trained our minds to think the way an employee thinks. It is fashionable to ask whether HR feels the pain that CEO feels. This question became so fashionable to ask some time ago that I once retorted that I actually want to see a CEO in pain; I have never seen one in that state.

The fact is that we HR Managers have lost touch with the masses; we have lost touch with the reality in that sense. We do not know how people travel because we travel in company buses or cars. We do not know the difficulty they have in getting children admitted in good schools and in teaching English to them. We have to understand that the employees feel, in many ways, an unprecedented pressure from their families to lead a better quality of life. Let me tell you a true story to highlight this point.

Jayawant Nipurte [18] is a young boy born in a very poor family. His father earns Rs 2000 per month from small jobs, locally called 'Mistry' or carpentry. Jayawant's father has three daughters studying in 10th, 8th and 4th standard in local school. They stay in Shahapur Taluka in Thane District.

Jayawant scored good marks at Secondary School Certificate exam, 81.2% under his circumstances show the intelligence and determination of the young man. With some help he enrolled for Diploma in Information Technology at an institute in Mumbra. Last year he cleared it with good marks again, scoring 80.75% marks.

Diploma Engineering students are allowed to apply to Degree Engineering colleges and if they secure admission, they are placed in second year. So several of his classmates applied for degree colleges for admission. Jayawant wanted to apply for his degree course too, but the hard realities of financial commitments stared in his face. In order to secure admission he would have had to pay Rs. 38,000 for each year, more than one and a half times his father's annual income. He asked for help. A relative advanced Rs. 5,000. A well wisher advanced Rs. 10,000. His village people collected Rs. 10,000. That made Rs. 25,000, all repayable. It still did not add up to the first year's fees. Jayawant's father

was moved by the indomitable spirit of the young lad and he sold his buffalo to raise the balance Rs. 13,000.

This story may be extreme but it surely indicates a pattern if you are familiar with ground realities. For a change therefore let us not ask ourselves whether we HR professionals feel the pain that CEO feels; it is time to ask whether we feel the pain that employees feel.

The point I am making is that we have to sensitise ourselves to the context and situation of employees. We have to go an extra mile and give ourselves experiences that make this happen, simply acknowledging employees' situation at intellectual level will not suffice; it will have to be at experience level. We have to understand that perception is intentional. You have to focus your energy then you 'see' things. When we go to a new city, we notice everything because we make efforts; but we walk through our lane like an automaton so we do not notice many a thing. Isn't this our common experience?

If we want to be successful we will have to understand our employees. To do that means to look at situation their way. The trouble is that we are so preoccupied with our routine operational work that we do not invest in developing our perspective. This is really a paradox because we are the people who have formally studied 'hear the other party' as a principle of natural justice!

I asked one of the employees what in his opinion was one good point about Asian Paints. I expected that he will say this is a cool company to work for or something similar. He said he appreciated that the company paid salary regularly on 7<sup>th</sup> day of each month without fail. I thought it was a kind of joke till I realised that his neighbours did not get their salaries regularly and that he was seeing their plight.

The context is important. The problem is that people rarely tell you the context; it has to be imagined. And we cannot imagine the context unless we are familiar with ground realities.

The second point I wish to talk about is that the time to develop the right work ethic is now.

After we set up a factory near Hyderabad in eighties, sometime passed when we came to know that our employees have met one Mr. Basi Reddy who was considered a naxalite and who was usually underground. But he was leading unions in many companies and was

known to be a union leader who did not hesitate to resort to violence. We then took an unusual step. We invited Basi Reddy to our factory. This unusual step actually surprised him. He was expecting resistance from us. We explained our people management policies to him and also told him that we practised productivity bargaining. The result was creation of an atmosphere of trust and confidence.

The trouble with industrial relations is that we approach it with fear instead of hope. Actually the best part about working in HR or IR is that it allows us to experiment. You do that when you act out of hope. Many companies have carried out various experiments and with rich dividends.

How to create good work ethic is a question that has always stayed in my mind. Long back I invited GN Sapre to conduct a session on work ethic for our workers. What he spoke, left a mark on me. Much later he wrote a book on work ethic in Marathi. It is perhaps the best book on the subject I have ever read. One mill owner from Dhule got an edition printed for him and distributed it free to his thousand workers.

I happen to attend the publication ceremony of the book. The chief guest was Dr. Sarojini Vaidya. Dr. Sarojini Vaidya who died recently, was one of the highly respected people in the field of Marathi literature. She has authored research on various authors and their work. She was the head of Mumbai University's Marathi Department. Dr. Vaidya spoke for one and a half hour on work ethic on that day. It was a speech full of insights and held the audience spell bound.

I went home asking myself how could she have developed so much insight on a subject like work ethic? Moreover it wasn't her subject. The answer was, in my opinion, that she was given to reflecting on how people led their lives and why. This as we know is a favourite subject of reflection among authors. Dr. Vaidya has written volumes on life and letters of various authors. The making of a person is what you consider in such cases. That gives you insight in various areas including work ethic.

I have always felt that by not reading good Indian literature we are denying ourselves a great source of learning. The advantage your generation has is that it is given to seeing more than reading. So people talk of Lagaan and draw lessons out of that movie. Now they have done it with three idiots too. My personal opinion is that watching a film does not force you adequately to stop and think. That's precisely where a book scores over a video.

Coming back to our issue of work ethic, the point I am making is that if we wish to develop good work ethic, we need to reflect on our daily experiences, our life.

In Mumbai it is quite common for working couples to leave a house key with their maid servant. Thousands have experienced that it is safe to do, nothing is ever lost. Nobody will dare to do this in Delhi. Why? What makes the difference? What makes Mumbai develop such work ethic? If we do not find out the critical factor chances are that we will not reinforce it.

In an atmosphere that is conducive to developing good relations, we must focus on developing work ethic.

It was a pleasant surprise to find that Godrej group has done some wonderful work with GN Sapre and has called him Guru Sapre on their web site. If you type GN Sapre and work ethic you will land up on the web page of Change issue of 2002 that shows Sapre's felicitation at Godrej.

In fact Sapre's life takes me to the third point. We invest so little in development of ourselves is what I have mentioned earlier. But we invest so little in development of our employees too. I am not referring to the number of training programs and training man-days and training budget. I am sure that the budget runs in crores of rupees and the other figures are impressive as well.

But we accept in the heart of our hearts that a worker will not make a good white collar employee. So we place a limitation on our own work of developing people.

Let me go back to GN Sapre. Do you know that Sapre could not speak till he was eight, he started speaking only then, and that he did not attend any school till he was ten? And Sapre later in life develops a way of raising and teaching deep philosophical issues, writes a book on work ethic that is a best seller and does good work at Godrej. How did this change happen? It was perhaps easy to write off Sapre. Somebody unknown must have been responsible for making him reflect on his experience. And somebody must have given him new experience.

At the organisation where I worked, we selected workers for training as Punch operators. That was the IT technology then. Eventually some

moved up to work as computer operators – we used to have big mainframes then that required operators. We did not have any problems about their output. The problem was with other employees of our systems department. They branded them as workers who have made it to staff, very often did not mix with them at lunch, the subtle differentiation was there to feel. We had problems in ensuring integration. I must confess I did not have skill to do it though the problem was evident. Today techniques are available to bring together people, table the issues and integrate. These skills are available at junior level too.

But are we experimenting enough? In a meeting on employability at Tata Institute of Social Sciences I learnt that children of farmers are joining Retail industry. They get trained for the service industry. This I am told is a big leap. Typically people have joined manufacturing from agriculture and then the next generation has moved to service industry. But here in our country a revolution is happening. Can we plan a mini revolution within our industry by moving some blue collar workers to white collar jobs?

What comes in the way today is not the paucity of skill, it is paucity of will. We have standards of competency at each level and we measure it before placing people on the job. We ask ourselves can he make it to executive cadre while recruiting while collar workers! I believe developing people is an agenda that needs to be understood differently. And we must ask ourselves a question: “ Are we subserving system or are we making system subserve us.”

I would suggest that this is the time to break some rules and make a difference.

I would now like to talk about making change happen in industry. In the last two decades changes in employee productivity have come through painful process. In fact I always believed that if you wish to bring about a major change in industry it required turbulence. The evidence of step jump in employee productivity as a result of industrial strife was unbelievably high.

When I joined the factory where I worked, we were making twenty thousand tonnes with over 900 workers and 300 staff. Today we make thirty thousand tonnes with two hundred workers and about eighty staff. This has happened largely as a result of a strike at least to the extent of 50%.

But I now realise that it was wrong on my part to believe so. Fritjof Capra's writing clarifies thinking, he says:

*“A machine can be controlled; a living system can only be disturbed. In other words, organisations cannot be controlled through direct interventions, but they can be influenced by giving impulses rather than instructions. To change a conventional style of management requires a shift in perception that is anything but easy, but it also brings great rewards. Working with the processes inherent in living systems means that we do not need to spend a lot of energy to move an organisation. There is no need to push, pull or bully it to make it change. Force or energy are not the issue; the issue is meaning. Meaningful disturbances will get the organisation's attention and will trigger structural changes.”*

In this era when employees are showing greater predisposition to change, can we bring about changes in unobtrusive way is the question. This admittedly is not easy. But do we have will and skill to impart meaningful disturbances?

Therefore what is important is our ability to communicate and influence. Knowledge of law is important because we can influence people with it. I think increasingly higher demands will be placed on this skill during your career.

The answer, admittedly the simplest one, is that we need to be in a learning mode all the time in our career; I would say as long as we live. It is for this reason that HR Meets are important to me. They promote learning, exchange of views. But there is one thing I would like to caution all of you against. Instead of telling the message directly I would rather read out a passage from Osho's book that I like so much. Osho was asked to speak on the difference between ordinariness and mediocrity. This is what he said: [I quote]

*“Mediocrity is the general state of humanity as it is. It is a retardedness of intelligence. Nobody wants you to be intelligent, because the more intelligent you are, the more difficult it is to exploit you. Every vested interest wants you to be mediocre. And to keep the mediocre person mediocre, a strange thing has to be put in to his mind: that he is extraordinary.*

*The society in so many ways gives people the feeling of being extraordinary. Hence it is difficult to find a person who does not deep down believe that he is special, the only begotten son of God. He may not say so, because he knows what happens if you say you are the only begotten son of God. Then crucifixion is certain, and resurrection – nobody knows whether it really happened or not. So he keeps it inside. This helps him to remain mediocre. If he understands he is mediocre, that very understanding will destroy his mediocrity. To understand that you are mediocre is a great leap into intelligence.*

*The ordinary person is a natural person. Nature does not produce special people. It produces unique people, but not special. Everybody is unique in his own way.*

*The ordinary person has a uniqueness and simplicity, humbleness. Out of his simplicity, humbleness, uniqueness he has really become extraordinary, but he has no idea of it.” [Unquote]*

I hope these conferences will lead you on the path of finding your uniqueness and becoming extraordinary.

Thanks,

Vivek

*Address at the HR Meet of Godrej*



