



| HUMAN RESOURCES |

HR's Diary

● "Establishing Credibility"

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Zahid carefully built up a good habit of going round the production floor whenever he could make some time. He tried to memorize as many names of the employees as he could - it was as though a kind of game he was playing in his mind. Not only addressing people by name, he also tried to associate individual information with the names so that he could ask them instantaneously about the personal issues, if any. He did not stop there asking the personal issues only - he also resolved those as a follow-up action within his limited capacity. It acted like magic. He started getting the result soon - his credibility amongst the employees was established just like that.

Zahid also tried to observe keenly during such floor visit usual demeanour demonstrated by individual employees. He now remembers about Karim, a machine operator who was a jolly person by nature and responded to his daily 'hello-how-are-you's with humour. Zahid literally used to long for hearing his humorous replies - every time it was different than that of the previous day. Karim was also a popular figure in that section for his witty jokes. Not only Karim, many others amused Zahid with their unique characteristics in responding to his well-being related questions. This became his daily chores for half an hour a day, and he expanded his visit to the whole branch. He learnt that the key to getting closer to people was all about knowing a bit of their personal issues they were faced with - be it social or professional.

He also started venturing into behind the line syndromes. If there was subtle change in the usual demeanour experienced with the people in the production floor or workplace he knew for sure that something had happened needing his attention. As a matter of practice, he did not want to remain just as a spectator but followed that up with a probe into such changes - could be small or big - without letting anyone know. He used to get curious about finding all the W's of the change (who, what, when, where and so on). This exercise actually created some scope for him to remain updated on all the developments at the workplace without actually depending on anybody else for being fed with the information. Besides, the veracity could be checked right on the spot. Although the method demanded a lot of time on his part but the greatest pay-out was he was seen as someone who was 'concerned about the wellbeing of the employees' - making him more and more credible.



This Company was good at experimenting newer management concepts as inputs for continuous improvement which grew a lot of enthusiasm in him from day one. But it also saddened him as some people termed such new efforts 'another flavour of the day.' In most of the cases, such efforts faded away being faced with the resistance to change at every level. There was a lack of conviction in the air.

He saw the dwindling fate of 'quality circle.' There were defined quality circles in the branch. Meetings were regularly held and the outcome got minuted religiously - but the ultimate result was more or less paper works. If someone would like to know about the quality circle practices, it could be presented with all the showy graphs and charts - perfect to the envious level. But if someone had really wanted to see the reflection - it was nil and the practice was taken more or less as rituals. The same phenomenon he observed in the case of safety committees. He asked himself why people over there practiced something which either they didn't believe in or did not want from the heart but practiced being forced to! The work culture was grappled with this kind of scenario.

Scope came sooner than he thought - his credibility had to face a real test. In one of those days, Production Director came to the branch and held a discussion with Zahid. He basically came up with a project which he termed 'Group Working' and sought Zahid's involvement in implementing that. Success of the project was totally dependent on the cooperation of the floor workers and their union representatives assenting to that. It was about bringing a cultural change in the work practice at the production floor.

The group working method spelled out a new work practice in which part of the production process was related by linear functions to be manned by a group of workers. The whole branch would be divided by a number of groups. Each group would be self-sufficient in composition of its members (having all the required roles) and would be responsible for achieving targeted production figures, productivity, and quality and safety standards. There would be no fixed break periods and no relievers to cover the absenteeism. Members would have their own break - like lunch, tea or any other breaks (for natural purpose) by turn - not all at a time. Similarly, different leave (annual, casual etc.) would be planned turn wise and there would be no leave coverage. The weaker performers would be counseled, motivated and retrained by the rest of the group members. The groups would be empowered to take their own decision in respect of wastage control, quality improvement, safety and technical training. Incentives would be on the basis of 'gain sharing' and be paid to the group and not to any individual. There would be group identity, colour, and jingles and so on and so forth. Indeed, quite a radical change would come forth as a result. Zahid could guess - if this could be implemented there would be a tremendous amount of improvement in every respect. However, he could also foresee vividly the hurdles enroute.



Zahid took this as a rewarding test to his own capability of working with the workers directly on a process project. Nevertheless, he was not sure about the right approach to undertake in taking it forward. He was also fearful as to how the union leaders would react to this. After all, this would mean no extra people - no extra employment; meaning more productivity without increasing the number of people. This definitely would conflict with their manifesto of increasing the number of employees by creating more jobs.

He spent a couple of days in planning the approach and drew a picture following force-field analysis method. He penciled a chart with the objective and the visible 'factors'; those would influence the path from now to the objective. He then categorized the factors into 'restraining' and 'favourable'. These factors would in fact force the 'present line (current stock of the situation)' to move either way. If the restraining force was stronger, the movement would be negative and vice versa.

He identified these factors one by one and the key persons behind those factors. He knew he would have to nurture the favourable factors and turn or neutralize the restraining factors and do it fast before the project was made public.

He regarded his newly grown credibility as one of the major favourable factors. Karim and other people like him in the production floor who were popular but not politically (union politics) inclined became his initial target group for gaining support. Broaching the subject to them was a sensitive issue altogether as it ran the risk of having a negative interpretation - something like bypassing the union deliberately with an ulterior motive. But at the same time, he was new and as such could enjoy the liberty of expressing some naïve or wild ideas directly to the workers and the union leaders were likely to view those as motiveless matters ('new people always show new interest at the outset' - kind of thing). So, he started to work on this assumption and surprisingly drew no skepticism from the union leaders as to his intention.

His approach of educating these people on 'group working' was indicative of a win-win situation. Gain sharing incentive was taken as the immediate achievement on the part of the group members should the project get rolled out. Consequent increase in profit participation fund in the long run was also highlighted. Other softer areas like participation in decision making as regards group affairs was also another important point emphasized by Zahid. Less interference by the shift management was also a consequential possibility.

No matter how positive the above factors sounded, things got overshadowed by the ingrained distrust in management actions. It was almost like a hard-nut-to-crack situation. Zahid did not lose his patience and kept on talking to them informally and individually. At one stage Zahid felt like giving up the efforts. He also did not feel it wise to talk to the union at that stage. As he knew for sure that union would refer to the workers for non-acceptance of such new ideas. However, after some hard efforts he at least could succeed in conditioning the minds of some of the popular workers towards group working concept.



On the part of the management staff, he could feel the indifferent attitude among some of the senior staff (in terms of service length). They took this simply as 'another flavour of the day.' However, he made a series of presentations to them on 'group working' concepts and practices. He also presented the success stories in other countries on such practices. As regards the management staff, he was more concerned with their indifference and non-committal attitude being strong restraining factors which were as good as union's resistance. The only difference between these two was 'visibility' - union's resistance was visible but the management staff's remained hidden. He did not lose heart - he kept on holding discussion sessions in which he invited senior managers from the corporate office to strengthen the support. At least he could neutralize these types of management staff at the end, which had tremendous nuisance value. He knew one word against the 'group work' by any senior management staff would jeopardize the whole effort.

Having conditioned the minds of the opinion molders at the production floor, and neutralizing the negative attitude of some of the senior management staff of the branch, Zahid thought that the time was ripe for him to talk to the union now.

He prepared his materials carefully along with video clips and then invited the union leaders to a discussion session - as though educating them on a work process practiced by the advanced countries. As expected, union leaders were quite reluctant to attend the session fearing the same as a trick for introducing work process which would ultimately reduce the numbers. With a lot of persuasion he could make them attend the session. There were volleys of questions raised by the union as to why he was so interested in holding the session. Zahid actually had not invited the union leaders just like that; he had also done some homework before. Through the key persons of the floor whom he had conditioned mentally by that time he subtly made them interested in attending the session. This actually paid off as the whole committee attended the session and got the exposure to the concepts he was harping on.

Zahid remembers now, after the session he passed the next couple of months by reinforcing the concepts whenever he got a chance while talking to the union. He then embarked on a series of discussion as a group and also individually and informally. Whatever his points of logic were, union always came back on the issue of ultimate employment loss and what financial gain the workers would have on this. It boiled down to the single concept of union negotiation - give and take. Accepting would mean to them giving up the employment opportunity against no immediate gain on the part of the workers. Zahid, however, kept on rattling on the ultimate gain sharing incentive and long term impact on profit participation fund.

After a hard negotiation, Zahid could make the union agree on the group working method but for only one group at the secondary manufacturing department as a pilot scheme. If that would be a successful scheme then they would agree on introducing the same throughout the branch gradually in all the departments. However, as a bargaining bit he also had to accept giving one special increment to all the group members, if they ran the concept successfully for three months.

Reminiscing now about the whole episode of introducing group working concept, Zahid is more sanguine in his belief that 'credibility' alone can contribute largely to any efforts undertaken by the management in bringing about any change in the workplace or making the employees accept something different. To establish credibility among the employees there is no short-cut for a manager but to get closer to the employees by applying his own ways and creativity in approach. Nevertheless, there is no single panacea available for working through the obstacles like these.

(This is sequence 9: to be continued)

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