



A Glimpse Into Factual Success Mantras Of Business

Leadership - Firing Or Firing-Up - II

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IN MY previous article published in *The Hitavada* on April 7, 2024, I had dealt with the topic of how organisations can develop a team of highly motivated persons – Firing-up of the employees so that they go above and beyond their assigned roles when the situation develops. The performance of the employees of Taj Hotel on the night of Nov 26, 2008 in Mumbai serves as a very strong example of the same.

However, matters become very challenging for a leader when he takes over an organisation that is severely stressed, in financial ruin, and is required to turn it around. I was faced with this situation a couple of times in my career when I was invited to join as CEO and revive an organisation that was 'sick'. The financial indicators were in the red, order books were low, reputation with client was very negative, assets were idling, and to top it all – morale of employees was at the very lowest ebb. The organisation appeared as a huge pyramid of people who were disillusioned, defensive and disinterested in taking on any work. These three 'D's' had to be replaced by a motivated team quite rapidly. Without the employees getting into action, there was little chance of revival.

This required some people to be Fired and the rest to be Fired-up – that was my assessment after the initial couple of weeks of being on the job and getting some deeper understanding of the organisation. Failures happen due to mis-management, full-stop, I do not wish to be forgiving to any manager – the manager has to bear the onus of any failure. Be he the leader of a team, a mission, a project, a department, or an organisation – and failure is by and large due to his inability to steer his team through the challenges that come in front of the running assignment that he leads. Managers tend to blame the market or extraneous conditions as reasons for the failure – but they forget the fact that the role of a "manager" is to manage all internal and extraneous conditions. His job is to realign his team to deal with the evolving situations and take relevant actions to deal with the situation. When I use the term 'manager' – it's for any and every manager – from the supervisor of a team of workers, right up to the CEO.

Moving back to my organisation, the primary category of persons who had to be fired were the ones who were unethical and corrupt. There was no concession on this aspect as I term such persons as termites in any organisation – they appear harmless but eat away the cores of the company. It was not easy to identify them, as they are smart in covering their tracks, like the termites – they are not visible till the external covers get blown. This is the prime reason why the organisation had become stressed. My predecessor and some co-operators were quite active in building personal wealth at the cost of company's wealth. This ailment was getting more and more obvious to me as the days went by, and my task was to weed out the co-operators who were buried deep in the organisation. Once this was done and over with, the unpleasant portion of my work was over, and the rest became the journey of pleasure.

Let's not confuse pleasure with comfort, the challenges were very huge, we still had to crawl out of the pits, but the forces that were pulling us down had been neutralised. So we were working on the way up. The team saw this, they were observing each and every action of their new CEO very closely, and assessing for themselves if I was genuinely interested in taking their company upwards, or just collecting my wages. Was I working for them, or was I working for solely myself? It has to be a mix of both in any case – but if "self" precedes the company, then the priorities are not correct. That's what they were judging, and deciding how much they can trust me and commit themselves to the organisational recovery process. I had to win them over, I had to win their trust, I had to win their confidence in my leadership, I had to win their allowance for wrong decisions that I would take at times.

With the first three months behind us, I was happy to see that the paradigm had shifted and their "new" CEO was no longer treated as new and they were comfortable to walk into my office, or stop me to talk about any issue if they met me outside my office. I had created an open-door policy for my office to create that sense of open-ness and transparency, very few discussions were held behind closed doors. Making myself accessible to every level of worker, from senior to junior, was critical during this phase – not only for the benefit of gaining the trust of employees but even for my sake. I needed information from all levels about the past history of failure and sometimes precious nuggets of information came from the juniors, who knew the grass-root details. In addition, the more persons I met, the more I got to know about those hidden talents that could be brought up and given positions of responsibility.

The other step I took was to give them proper working conditions. Right from physical to systemic – they needed a clean and hygienic work environment, and also they needed proper work-flow systems that allowed them to work with efficiency. Coming to a clean and ergonomic workplace encourages people to show up for work – that's a factual result of a study, one does not need to create plush workspaces but it's a must to have clean and functional workplaces. When we set the offices right, it does not cost much to clean a place and replace some worn out chairs with proper chairs, people were more happy to come to their workplace than before. One has to appreciate that one-third of a person's working life is spent in his workplace! It has to be a place where he is happy to come to.

(To be continued)

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