

## PPSSST—THE HR MANAGER IS AROUND

On his recent visit to India, internationally renowned creativity guru Dr. Edward de Bono was asked in what way the Indian mind was different from those he encountered elsewhere in the world. Dr Bono replied insightfully ‘Elsewhere people could be accused of missing the woods for the trees. In India people miss the wood for the leaves’.

What he meant was that in our obsession about fine details we miss the larger picture. Some of the related characteristics are the tyranny of the rule, quoting ‘audit objection’ to stymie the most enlightened of suggestions, a refusal to have a re-look at timeworn practices and indeed a refusal to rethink on extant ways of thinking.

At a dinner meeting at a five star hotel in New Delhi I asked the manager why he had provided forks and knives but no spoons at the buffet table. ‘It is not the practice in hotels abroad to place spoons’ was the reply. I requested him to demonstrate to me how I could consume *sambhar* with either of the accessories. He looked sheepish but did not remedy the situation.

Emerging from a mall in Mumbai my carry bag neatly sealed, I was stopped by a guard outside the exit door, who asked me to show the paid bill which I did, though I was earlier tempted to throw it into the dustbin. He fumbled in his trouser pockets, fished out a rubber stamp and proceeded to stamp my bill with an illegible legend. The stamp did not work. He was about to head for his boss’s room for a substitute stamp when I asked him what purpose the stamp served. ‘I do not know but rules are rules’ he said peremptorily. The boss emerged ten minutes later only to inform us that the substitute stamp did not work either and would we please wait till he received suitable instructions from Head Office? By then at least 50 shoppers had collected and our temper was made worse by the scorching sun. Over entreaties to spare us this agony fell on deaf bureaucratic ears. Finally a serious and stern looking man calling himself the administration manager appeared and proceeded to sign the bills –a formality that delayed us by a further fifteen minutes. Incidentally I passed on my bus ticket which also he quickly signed! I asked him the rationale for this ridiculous procedure, but he mumbled something under his breath, which I am sure even he did not understand.

If this is the state of private sector organizations we can shudder at the state of affairs in government undertakings. Here is an unbelievable but tragically true story narrated by a well-known Indian economist writing in a leading

business magazine. Apparently there is a clerk in an obscure state government office in the southern city of Tiruchirapally who sends a one-- line statement to his superior who in turn sends to his boss and so on till it reaches the District collector and thence to the State Secretariat. At the end of this tortuous exercise the paper finds itself on the august desk of an External Affairs Ministry worthy who promptly files it .

The contents of this letter that was being sent till a recent date---

‘Sir , During this month we have not sent any cigars to Sir Winston Churchill’.Talk of famous one liners. I rest my case here.

It appears that our excessive zeal to be correct in procedure and our expertise in handling small details and in processing paper, has its advantages .

DR. Bono ,for example, attributes our success in software programming to this unique ability of ours. We may add that the jobs currently being out-sourced by developed countries to India are precisely those where little thinking and much detailing are required—call-centre operations, accounting, medical transcription, tax returns filling and processing etc.

It is here that farsighted and creative HR managers have a role to play. I call it the PPSSST approach that HR managers could adopt,.

This acronym stands for POLICIES, PROCEDURES, SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES, STRATEGY, TACTICS. These are broadly areas where the creative HR manager could initiate a Lateral thinking drive to re-look and rethink. The Lateral thinking tool of ‘Challenge’ is just what he and his company need to creatively challenge procedures and practices and come up alternatives that will achieve the accepted objectives with least number of speed-breakers along the way.

The Challenge technique requires us to examine the Dominating ideas, Boundaries, Essential factors, Assumptions, and Avoidance factors behind each aspect of a company’s working. These can be challenged creatively and unobtrusively without upsetting egos. The result could be one of the following three—a decision to eliminate the rule for example, or re-assess the reasons for continuing it or finally to come up with an alternative for it that will be user friendly, less cumbersome, less detailed, or more time and cost efficient .

My experience has been that this challenge technique produces the best results with the least disruption to ego’s when applied to the rules, procedures and even form filling activities in an organization. In this context the ETDBW[Easy To Do Business With] approach when viewed at from the perspective of the many people and institutions that interact with the company when combined with the Challenge technique generate the best ideas that go to make it a pleasure for others to interact with us. .

In the five star hotel example ,the manager was blindly following what may be the practice in the west where food habits are different from ours. In the Cigar case the practice was hopelessly outdated by over 50 years at least. In the mall case the rule made no sense except to keep the security guards busy.

This technique of Challenge, which is but only one aspect of the exciting and extraordinarily useful bouquet of lateral thinking techniques holds the key to de-stifle organisations of rule-boundedness and clinging on to outdated modes of thinking and doing.

At a seminar on ‘Liberalisation’ recently I asked a top industrialist how many clearances he now needed to set up a medium- sized manufacturing venture. ‘33000 signatures’ was his reply. Clearly our Government is not yet ‘ Easy To Do Business With’.

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