

THE BROKEN WINDOW

The editor of a Delhi based newspaper wrote a center-- page article bemoaning the fall in standards of the Indian Foreign Service. It was but natural that this article would be followed by a barrage of letters from readers, some agreeing with him and some not amused. Some of the letters were truly insightful and gave glimpses of a less known psychological and management concept.. I quote just one of the letters

“What an apt label for a bunch of file pushers ‘The India Fossil Service’ . I happened to visit the Indian consulate in the prime AAA category real estate in Singapore in 2001. The moment I stepped inside, the shabby interiors made me realize I am dealing with a third world country. The consulate exists in a typical Indian colonial type building with lots of chips in plaster and torn carpets. The library was a clutter of books. Even the newspapers were six days old!”

A top corporate honcho once told me that when interviewing a candidate for a position in his company he made his initial judgment about the merits of the person by taking a close look at the state of polish of his or her shoes!

What these instances have in common is a much underutilized psychological and management concept—the concept of the broken window.

This concept had its origin in the 1990’s when there was a decrease in violent crimes in the USA. There were a number of straightforward reasons for this decline—crackdown on cocaine trade, economic recovery, aging of the population, etc.. However there was no consensus on the reasons for the decline of crime in New York. None of these favorable conditions were evident in that city at least not to the extent that the decline could be explained.. It was then that criminologists James Wilson and George Kelling argued that crime is the inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon more windows will be broken, and the sense of anarchy will spread from the building to the street on which it faces, sending signals that ‘ anything goes’. In a city relatively minor problems like graffiti, public disorder and aggressive behavior are all equivalent to the broken window , invitations to more serious crime. Thus, they say, if a neighborhood cannot prevent a person from eve-teasing , the eve-teaser may reason that it is even less likely to call the police to identify him or to interfere if he decides to mug a passerby.

This is evident in towns and cities and offices all over our country. The Singapore Consulate example is really a “showcase” of our offices and public places all over the country. Anything goes, or the Hindi equivalent ‘*Chalta hai*’, is really the starting point of an epidemic. Who can deny that the rot is evident everywhere in our country? The conclusion is that a small act of neglect or casualness can start an epidemic and affect an entire country. The moment that we do not set right a broken window we are initiating a torrent of consequences.

In the mid-nineties the New York transit authorities hired Kelling, the criminologist referred to above, and he in turn advised them to try out the ‘ broken window’ theory in practice.. They obliged and asked the subway director David Gunn to oversee the multi-billion dollar rebuilding of the subway system. Gunn decided to first stamp out graffiti scrawled on the cars. Many commentators advised him to concentrate on the big issues—crime, safety etc and not to worry about ‘small things’ like graffiti. . Worrying

about graffiti at a time when the entire system was about to collapse was, they said, like scrubbing the decks of the Titanic. But the broken window theory told Gunn otherwise. He felt that at the outset the battle against graffiti was to be fought. Without that all the management reforms and changes would not help. Gunn drew up a plan of action to clean up the system line by line and train by train. He told his colleagues—no car would go out into the system unless all graffiti was removed, come what may, Every time vandals messed up a car, the graffiti would be erased till the message went home—graffiti is out for ever! Over a period of time the subway became squeaky clean. Thereafter the theory was applied to other aspects of the subway with remarkable results.

In a management context we have lessons to learn from this theory. An epidemic in the sense of deterioration in the functioning of a company can be reversed by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment.. You do not have to rectify and immediately solve big problems. Start with small ones.. A top executive told me that he made sure small grievances of his employees were attended to with speed. This he tells me has created the impression of a caring management which his company anyway is. But the issue is that he is convinced it is in the small matters that his employees assess him.

In my workshops on Innovation I am asked how to sell one's innovative ideas to top management. I cite the example of one of the participants of an earlier workshop, who, fired by his skill lateral thinking rushed to his MD and told him that the company ought to get out of their business since he saw no future in that line of activity. This he said was his 'strategic' creative input.. Needless to say, he was asked to mind his business which was to arrange travel tickets for his bosses. I then advised him to start with small innovations where the risk element was negligible. He is now the Manager Innovation, for his company !

It used to be said about Margaret Thatcher that one leadership trait of hers that stood out was her ability and willingness to take fast decisive action on relatively small issues.

As they say in a different context 'God is in the small details'.

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