

My Experiences of Human Values in Corporate Learning

by
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Between 2006 and 2009 I was senior vice president in-charge of learning at Satyam*. I had the responsibility to get people capability up so that they could be placed in billable roles with the minimum delay and minimum expenditure. My direct responsibility was for 97% of Satyam people globally, i.e. all but 3% of the top leaders. In 2008, that was about 48,000 people.

We had to contend with low employability of the intake pool. That was about 25% employability in our source pool of Indian engineering graduates and 35% employability in our source pool of Malaysian engineering graduates, according to the then current McKenzie reports. So we ended up investing 4-11 months of corporate learning in every fresher (new entry-level employee). A large percentage of this investment would walk out of the door at the end of the 2-year bond period – attrition at this level was as high as 50%.

Even though overall attrition was at 10-13%, what mattered was the attrition amongst the most profitable billable people (freshers) and the most productive billable people (5-8 year experienced people). So at the 5-8 year experience level also we had to contend with talent and company knowledge walking out. Even though we could hire experienced people, we had to ensure continuity of customer interface, project know-how, technical knowledge and company culture, and keep the payroll from becoming overly inflated.

The key numbers we were looking for included:

1. Customer satisfaction
2. Days to billability for fresh graduates or bench days on account of lack of skills for experienced people
3. Attrition

We asked ourselves: Do employees have any allegiance to the company and vice versa? So what keeps people in the company? What propels some to excel and the rest to mediocrity? What makes some people 'good' and others to 'do what it takes'? What keeps some people fresh & smiling while most others whither into routine & cynicism with the years?

Prevailing wisdom was that "people join good companies, and leave bad managers"; that "20% people do 80% of the work"; that "people want plum positions with minimal direct responsibility"; that "pay depends on the market"; that "people bring their morality from home"... and so on.

This was not a sudden or external change – I was becoming aware that 'it' was happening to me too! I had no deep answers myself and I did not know where to turn for help.

All this said & done, the questions for me were "Can anything be done"? and "What can I do"?

We had explored several approaches over the years, mostly for mid-level leaders. These included (in no particular order):

- Prof. Samba Murthy's Human Growth Lab (5 days)
- ISABS (5 days)
- ISISD (5 days)
- Robin Sharma's Grow the Leader workshop (5 days)
- Steven Covey's 7 Habits workshop (2 days)
- XLRI's Emotional Intelligence workshop (5 days)
- Gallup's Strengths Based Leadership program (5 days)
- Art of Living workshop (5 days)
- Oneness Breakthrough (3 days)
- Landmark (5 days)
- Swami Sukhbodhananda's Personal Effectiveness Program PEP (2 days)

As head of learning at Satyam, I was nominated member IIIT-Hyderabad's academic council and through that I met Rajeev Sangal, director of IIIT-Hyderabad. His simplicity, conceptual clarity, depth of knowledge and sincerity was immediately obvious. We became good family friends in due course. Since 2005 he had been inviting me for this 7-day workshop on Human Values. I did agree to attend to 'check it out' in June 2006. The comprehensive view of reality did not leave any doubts. The method of self-verification encouraged me to take personal responsibility, and to conclude. I found the discussions to be most enriching and starting to end years of confusion.

The first workshop in 2006 was an eye opener. I did not absorb much in the first workshop – I was just sure that this was deep thought about everything that is and it is where I could find all the answers. I have attended many workshops after the first one. The Adhyayan workshop in 2008 in Kanpur was a turning point for me. I became quite

aware of my current state and started making effort to understand further, to develop my competence, to be a better person at home and work.

One key thing I got was that everything that exists, is in order. It is not a chaos. Everything is related to everything else in a mutually fulfilling manner. If we recognize it as such, the fulfillment of the relationship leads to mutual happiness & mutual enrichment. If we are ignorant of this, we assume the relationship to be a zero sum game, and we compete – this leads to continuation of unhappiness and deprivation. With a very clear description of existence, one can place the events for what they are and make effort to harmonize, to be happy and prosperous.

Instead of sharing my workshop experiences, I tried to 'teach' my family what I had heard at the workshop. It was not taken the way I intended – and we are still trying to get over that! Now I understand that the solution is to focus on my own 'abhyas' till the others are assured by my actions and are then willing to discuss. My efforts in my family can be discussed separately.

Since there was a bit less 'history' to deal with at work and there was this pre-existing positional authority, I feel there was some impact at the workplace. Here I'd like to share 3 key experiences.

Experience #1: *Relationship is lasting; memory of physical facilities fades in due course of time*

When I was appointed head of learning in 2003, I inherited team of about 160 professionals. At that time a substantial portion of company profit was shared as incentive once or twice every year. It was distributed amongst permanent employees who were a certain level and above. We chose to be egalitarian and distributed the incentive to all employees and contractors, regardless of level. We could disburse the ASOP to employees only, so we compensated the contractors in cash. While this was appreciated by some at the time, it seems that there is no memory of this today – this is almost never a topic of discussion.

In 2008, we could develop a 1-day workshop we called '**Introduction to Excellence**'. We did this in two forms – one as an essential part of the curriculum for long programs and two as a public program, open to employees and their families. We reached about 800 employees and families in the first 8 months of its introduction. The results were positive:

1. People are keen to know – this discussion is needed
2. Some of the people have attended the full workshop after attending the 1-day workshop

Since 2006 I had started sending our master trainers (mostly behavioral) for the full workshop. The idea was to further develop our delivery capability. With the change of hands, change of leadership in learning, the 1-day workshop was dropped from the curriculum. Perhaps it was mostly on account of deeply held assumptions, which may take time and effort to deal with. Some people have continued with their adhyayan are still associated with the effort. I feel the work will start once the conditions are conducive, and the people are ready.

In all this, the most significant part was the discussions with the learning team, globally. I spent at least one day with each member of the team discussing the propositions.

After 2 years of leaving the company, people connect back and not just for references. They discuss their learning, they want advice or just share what they are doing. This has been most important and satisfying for me.

I understood that people value right understanding and feelings in relationship more than physical facilities, even in a corporate setting.

Experience #2: *Management by relationship is effective & lasting; management primarily on the basis of positional authority is tiring*

My style of management used to be quite conventional – to divide the work, assign it out and to review or evaluate progress. When things went well, we would generally over-evaluate the work, and when things went the other way, we used statements of condemnation – mostly because reviews were usually late into the timeline to take significant corrective action.

This change happened assiduously, I feel. I reduced the meetings to talk about what the others need to do and increased discussions where we would outline collective (mine and their) goals as well as the process steps – we started working as a bigger team, discussing more and more often and in more minute detail.

One example of this was the Faculty Development Program (FDP) we ran for faculty of colleges we hired from. The FDP had been running for several years as such. When we had an opportunity to run one for Malaysian colleges, I discussed the goals and process in detail with Brig. Daleep George, who was in-charge of our Campus Program. The result was a complete revamp of the FDP focused on purpose from the point of view of the faculty, their colleges and collectively for a larger goal "to improve student employability". In spite of having to rework several iterations, and to

the nth level of detail, we could collectively do a great job only because working in this way (in relationship and for a clear purpose) was not so tiring at all.

Another example is the work we did on developing integrated content and pedagogy for our entry level program. The idea was to integrate technical & behavioral content and its evaluation; and to deliver it on a large scale in a consistent and effective manner – we had planned for an intake of 12,000 entry level employees in 16-weeks a-piece, across 6 countries. This was a big project involving at least 20 key people; Dr. Prakash Goteti being one of the key leaders in this endeavor. The command and control mode had been tried out since 2002, but it just did not yield the results. In 2007, we could re-start this and reach somewhere we can call success. My success measure is people who call and reflect on its future; and the impact we could generate in terms of day-1 project-ready people.

There are several other examples. The most significant outcome from this entire set of experiences was that other departments asked our department to lead or co-lead inter-departmental projects. While we don't know how to measure trust, we could feel we were trusted.

As a result of all the efforts up until 2007 “through SLW, we have made a definitive statement towards our commitment to efficient learning and performance activities globally. And the world has noticed this. Early 2007, Satyam became the first company in Asia to be ranked 15th in the prestigious Training Top 125, a global ranking of best training organizations. In October 2007, Satyam was awarded the number 1 ranking in the American Society for Training and Development's (ASTD) BEST Awards 2007. This recognition also makes Satyam the first non-US organization and the first in Asia to make it to the number one slot at ASTD BEST” [Visit http://www.mahindrasatyam.com/careers/learning_satyam.asp to read about the impact. Since then the company was called Satyam and learning arm was called Satyam Learning World (SLW), I have taken the liberty to mention it as such].

Although I was free to, I chose not travel to the US to be at the ASTD awards ceremony in 2007. I was happy to be in Hyderabad with most of my team – I still remember, we were live at the Planet Satyam studio with all India, Malaysia and China locations online...

I understood that people do appreciate meaningful work and the value-add from a “bhagidar”. For me that feeling of meaningful value-add was more satisfying than anything obtained primarily on the basis of positional authority or any external accolade.

Experience #3: Decisions Post Satyam

On 7th January 2009, the company was rocked by an enormous scandal – Rs 7,000 crores of shareholder wealth had been misappropriated by few in power, allegedly led by the then chairman. The stock fell dramatically that day and over the next several days. From a high of Rs 544 in 2008, it fell to Rs 11.50 on 10th January 2009. The government of India stepped in with both a CBI inquiry as well as a relief package. Some social commentators see this saga more as a part of a broader problem relating to India's caste-based, family-owned corporate environment... I could see this as yet another example of exclusive focus on physical facilities; lack of right understanding and lack of fulfillment in relationship. I now wonder “would this have happened the way it did, had we started HV at Satyam several years ago”?

I left Satyam on 18th June 2009. For the next few months, I relaxed, explored and reflected.

Now what is the next step for me? Another job? Consult independently? Do something that would make a difference, make things better? I had no means to make a difference except a smattering of what I had understood from HV – what could I contribute?

Upon reflection 4 important conclusions emerged:

1. That I want to do something meaningful, and to repair the damage done in the past
2. Sharmila's** support was definite and in the form of taking care of the home front, to start with
3. We had simple needs, even though not concretely articulated or estimated
4. We had enough confidence in our future earning potential and in savings to meet our needs

This was not a feeling of samridhi, but maybe just a glimpse. It was definitely enough for making my future commitment – I decided that rather than 'yet another job', I would spend my time in understanding and in helping to promote human values.

Epilogue

I reached Kanpur at 3:00AM on 24th January 2010.

I am quite sure now that these experiences would not have taken place had it not been for this knowledge. And had it not been for Ganesh-ji and Didi. I also know that I have a lot more to understand, to learn and apply; and to repair the damage done in ignorance.

Collectively and individually, corporations are a dominant global force today – Of the 100 largest economies, over 51% are corporations, not governments. It is corporate agenda (profit) that is predominant.

I have understood that opposing a problem does not lead to a solution. Acceptance of the people and taking responsibility for a joint solution along with a vision of the whole can lead to a solution – facilitating small steps toward transformation.

Corporate Universities can play a significant role in shaping the agenda and culture of the corporation; and influencing individual behaviour. When corporations start working on values, the change can be swift – starting with establishment of trust in relationship, people can transform management models, corporate processes and corporate agenda.

I feel it is a part of my responsibility to do my bit to facilitate this transformation in education and in corporations; perhaps in small but definite steps.

*Satyam Computer Services Limited, now called Mahindra Satyam (OTC: SAYCY), a leading information, communications and technology (ICT) company providing top-class business consulting, information technology and communication services (see http://www.mahindrasatyam.com/corporate/about_us.asp)

**Sharmila is my wife. She is a practicing paediatrician at Apollo, Secunderabad