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## Leadership approach, a paradigm shift

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I am choosing to write about four persons, two of whom I don't know at all and one whose name perhaps I am incorrect about. Yet, these are persons who have demonstrated leadership qualities and approach in four completely different areas, as far back as the 1970s, which revealed the need to be humane, gentle and compassionate. Their approach in the 70s defied what was then popular in exercising leadership which was largely command and control.

One of the persons who I wish to write about was a Major Manoranjan, whose name as I confessed earlier may be incorrect. Yet my friend Subash Menon, with whom I went to college, used to talk about the Major as a fine manager and kind human being.



Major Manoranjan worked for a sterling company of which Subash Menon's father was the Chairman. The Major was in charge of handling human resources and

personnel management, as it was then called, and he apparently adopted the principle of 'managing by walking around.'

In the 1970s labour management was a major challenge for many organisations, for employees and employers often saw each other not as allies but as adversaries. Thus, every interaction between representatives of either body would be imbued with harshness, unwillingness to understand one other's point of view and the intent of winning at all costs. Thus, meetings would conclude with both parties leaving the discussion table unhappy, chagrined and miserable.

Subash used to talk about Major Manoranjan as a manager who would first listen before asking to be listened to. He would attempt to understand the employee's

difficulties, his personal challenges and his need to establish his identity. Since most organisations in the 70s gave employees an identification number by which they would be addressed, several employees believed they were a mere statistic in the organisation. Organisations that used an assembly line approach, where employees would be required to only do their bit and have little understanding of the complete process of manufacturing, would leave employees feeling incomplete and undervalued.

Thus when Major Manoranjan would listen to the grievances that employees brought to the table he would recognise the pain and anguish of the employee who merely felt himself to be a cog in the wheel. He would therefore speak to them kindly, with compassion, warmth and affection and often times would embrace them to genuinely demonstrate management's gratitude for their contribution. During his tenure in the organisation there was very little strife and employees began to feel valued and appreciated.

Mr Shroff, Chairman of Excel Industries Limited, Mumbai, who again I do not know, yet met when he came to recruit graduates from the management institute I studied in, in the late 70s, shared with us the need to actually practice empathy not as a stated value but as a lived value. In his address to us, he talked about empathy as it is popularly known as 'getting into the other's shoes.' Yet the twist in his sharing was 'before you get into another's shoes, you must get out of yours. To want to get into another's shoes wearing your own is not empathy but sympathy.' This truth has remained with me in all the years that I have worked and I now hear many managers saying what Mr. Shroff said way back in the 70s.

Mr. N.Krishnaswamy, an erstwhile Inspector General of police in Tamil Nadu is another person I recall with respect and admiration. While he was a serving police officer, a career that required strictness, discipline and absolute submission to authority by those who have to follow the law, Mr. Krishnaswamy donned a very different hat when he directed English plays for a group of enthusiastic and keen youngsters such as we were.

He would give each of us a part to play in the drama that he was directing and would ask each of us to understand the character the way we did. He would then ask each of us to demonstrate our understanding. As a director I am sure he was clear in what he expected from each of us. Yet he would never impose his ideas on us but engage us in a way that would help us delve into the depth of the character.

He would work with us through encouragement, gentleness and warmth and as we proceeded with the rehearsals he would gently tweak each of our performance such that when we actually went on stage the effect would be one of 'co-creation.' When we would thank him for helping us deliver our performance effectively, he would in disarming fashion actually use the word 'co-creation' and tell us that we did it together.

Similarly he would always look for what was possible by each of us to offer to the performance and highlight our competence, not for once even allowing us to recognise or indulge in self-flagellation. Thus the process of our coming together as actors, performing on stage and the reception we received would give us all a collective feeling of well being. There was always a sense of an ensemble performance and never one person being better than the other. Competition was subtly replaced by collaboration and cooperation among us.

Finally, I wish to write about Mr R. Srinivasan, who was Principal of the school I studied in and taught us geography.

As is now wont, many educational institutions encourage students to read, understand and write about the subject that is being taught not through the technique of rote and memorizing but through introspection and self-discovery. This approach which is now current and gaining prominence was a methodology that Mr. Srinivasan followed, again in the 70s. He would introduce us to a topic and then suggest that each of us visit a library, most often it would either be the British Council or the USIS and have us make our own notes. He would expect that we would answer questions that he set for us from our understanding of the subject and the notes we had gathered as we delved into the subject.

In similar fashion he would encourage dialogue in the classroom asking each of us to share our point of view and gently prevent arguments or debate. The dialogue technique that he taught us helped many of us learn to listen actively and attentively to one another.

In summary the four gentlemen who I have written about demonstrated leadership qualities and traits at a time when all of what they said and did seemed ahead of the times.

Briefly the lessons learnt which are now practiced and encouraged assiduously by organisations and people include:

- To listen before being listened to.
- To understand before being understood.
- To get out of one's own shoe before attempting to get into another's.
- To recognise that co-creation is a more sustaining and enabling quality than to be told what to do.
- To establish our competence and uniqueness and not be a clone of another.
- To dialogue is more effective than to debate.

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