



Leadership »

Leading with Care

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In the corporate world today, we are working in a hyper environment. Targets, deadlines, and performance have become the three buzzwords that our corporate life seems to revolve around. Meetings, conferences, conclaves and even personal interaction with bosses have only one central theme – performance, performance and performance. Competition has unleashed its own unintended consequences. Infatuation with performance has created widespread anxiety in managers. Without performance, no doubt, no organization can survive, let alone succeed. But high performance culture without compassion and care can be dysfunctional as it can lead to alienation, withdrawal or resignation. We can never hope to get the very best from others unless we have feelings for others' pains, agony and distress, with a caring and helping attitude in their difficult times. Even mere empathizing has the potential to soothe and comfort those in distress.

Many studies have revealed that most people leave the organization due to the uncaring and unhelpful attitude of their immediate bosses. Compassion in highly result-driven leaders and managers is today not only desirable, but is necessary for sustaining a high performance culture. It can no more be discretionary. If the top leadership shows compassion, it tends to flow down the hierarchy. How do we build compassion into the DNA of our leadership? How do we identify result-driven but uncompassionate rising stars and mentor them? Employee caring policies would need to be well-woven into the corporate HR programs.

Early in my career, when I joined a bank branch, I had a boss who showed contempt for my educational qualifications and showed no interest in my learning period or my mistakes. Soon after, I approached the head of personnel - one Mr. Bhide - who not only replied to all my communications, but helped me choose a career in HR. I experienced an uncaring immediate boss who made me seriously consider resigning from the job and also an understanding boss who empathized with me and helped me discover my potential in HR.

If people are the primary drivers for the success of a business, it is only fair to expect that this resource is carefully nurtured through both intellectual development and caring.

A caring and compassionate leader is someone who communicates openly, is flexible, is not afraid to show emotions and leads by example. The question is: Do our leadership grooming strategies focus on these or they excessively focus merely on intellectual development?

High focus on performance is but natural in the times of transformation, particularly in crisis-laden organizations. We expect people to walk an extra mile, spend longer working hours and demonstrate an adaptable behavior. When we are on an organizational transformation journey, we also need to fire on all cylinders and that too, many a times simultaneously. This is bound to cause anxiety, tension and even fatigue.

CEOs have to move around the organization, meet employees at all levels to get the firsthand knowledge as to how our employees feel on the ground, see how existing HR machinery is working or faltering, how employees problems and grievances are resolved and what are the bottle necks if any. Leaders who connect with people's problem proactively, are able to bond emotionally and invariably win their confidence. This is fundamental to seek higher performance with greater commitment and reduced anxieties. In modern corporations, CEO-employee connect is far more important to create better alignment of employees with the organization. My own experience is that a high performance culture can be sustained only in a caring and compassion driven organization. It is like a balm that restores a sense of balance in the organization.

In 2005-08, when we kicked off our transformational journey in the bank, we had to deal with the prevailing complacent culture. We needed to create a performance driven organization with accountability built at every level. Moving from a complacent culture to a performance culture creates its own tensions and an employee-caring culture can absorb these tensions and eventually help employees to transcend to high performance culture. In a hierarchy oriented service organization, with vast geographically dispersed branch network, mobilization of human effort has been the central theme of our transformational agenda. While developing high performance culture, we also introduced employee-care programs that provided confidence to the employees across the country that they could expect to get solutions to their problems within 24/48 hours. Two most powerful programs were Sampark – helpline for employees and Paramarsh – employee counseling centers.

Sampark

With the objective of providing instant relief to employees facing grave personal problems, I set up, in my secretariat, a helpline for employees, which was christened as Sampark. Cases of extreme emergency could reach me directly through a dedicated e-mail id or employees could send their request on my direct fax number or post it to our corporate office address.

Under this initiative, I often received letters from employees seeking my help generally for transfers in case of death of close family members, extreme medical emergency arising out of serious diseases like cancer, heart problems or an accident, etc. I distinctly remember the first case under Sampark – a letter from an officer informing me that his only son who was in the US had died in a car accident. He had sought an immediate transfer to his hometown so as to be with his distraught family members in their hour of grief and loss. He was immediately transferred to his hometown and I also spoke to him conveying my pain.

Another case which moved me very much and almost brought tears to my eyes is when an employee wrote to me that he had taken education loan for his two sons for pursuing higher studies. One of them had just taken up a job and was all set to repay the loan with interest but unfortunately, he met with an accident and died. He approached me through Sampark to waive off the interest on the loan as he would find it extremely hard to pay interest in the absence of his son, an earning member of the family. This was an issue requiring humane consideration. I agreed to his request immediately.

This initiative brought me in touch with the real life problems of the employees and it became a very potent symbol of a caring management. It also created tremendous goodwill for the bank. Employees wrote to me personal letters assuring their commitment to perform with renewed zeal. It emotionally connected the employees with the top management.

Paramarsh

To help better cope with the pressures and strains on the life of the employees, we set up counseling centers at five metro centers and engaged professional counselors to provide counseling services to them. The intention behind this initiative was to help our employees lead a happy and satisfied lifestyle.

These two employee-care programs greatly helped our employees to cope with the pressures and tensions of the transformation process. They happily bore the brunt of implementing many changes simultaneously and helped the bank achieve many milestones in the shortest possible time.

It was a unique experience for me in my entire career in the bank to witness such passion in our frontline. Undeterred by long hours of work and the demands of ever demanding customers during the transition time, they demonstrated extraordinary commitment to make the transformation happen at ground level. Curiously, this kind of dramatic change happened in those who were highly unionized for years and accustomed to a limited and restricted role.

The core of a CEO's role is not just to create a high performance culture, but simultaneously create a caring organization and personally demonstrate his commitment to create a flexible and open organization to respond to employees' problems. Notwithstanding their very busy professional lives, great leaders find time to demonstrate their compassion when it is needed most. We all know that not long ago, Ratan Tata visited the home of every family which had lost its member in the Taj Mahal Hotel during the 26/11 terrorist attacks. What a fine example to demonstrate compassion by the iconic leader!

I don't think any leader can truly lead without caring.

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