

Integrating The Values of Leadership

Prem Vas, AVP and Head-HR, MobME, is a person for whom leadership is second nature having served in a leadership position in the Indian Armed Forces for twenty one years. He has successfully managed to integrate the values of leadership into the realm, and, through some very innovative HR interventions managed to carve a niche for himself and also for the company.

- BY S. AJAY KUMAR

How do you look back at your professional journey so far? Please share some very enriching experiences that you came across so far?

My professional journey revolves around two careers - two decades in the Indian Army and a decade in the corporate world. The initial formative years worked to hone the basics well in terms of professional and personal grooming. I worked with some excellent leaders in both the worlds, and, some of their qualities rubbed onto me in many ways. In a nutshell, persistence of purpose, professional and personal integrity, seeking creative solutions to seemingly impossible situations, the ability to visualize with foresight during planning and execution, keeping abreast with professional reading, staying unruffled in adverse situations, effective use of appropriate one-liners to lighten tense situations are some of the enriching experience I gathered over a period of three decades.

What are the important lessons in life that were imbibed by you in the wake of some very challenging

times in your career?

I have mentioned below the three prominent lessons of life among the many pearls of wisdom I picked up over the years.

Professionally and personally, most of the challenges centre around dealing with our team members- colleagues, peers, bosses, families and friends. I have, with painful experience, realized that you cannot impose both your personality and your perceptions onto others. To elicit the best among people you need to understand what works for them. Sometimes, a mere hint, a subtle suggestion, or even a word of encouragement works best with a lot of people. A few may need to be dealt with an iron first with velvet gloves, and, a few others will need a dressing down in private to help them wake up. A lot depends on what works for them, and, I had to develop the ability to understand the right technique which works constructively for each individual personality.

The second important lesson, I learnt especially as a HR leader, is to realize the futility of trying to

RAPID FIRE

Favourite Quote: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"- The Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr

Leadership style: Transformational and Collaborative Leadership

Current professional goal: To enable transition of a successful start-up to the next level of growth

Favourite book: "Good to Great" by James C Collins

Favourite movie: "The Secret" by Rhonda Byrne

Favourite music artist: "Pink Floyd" and "Usher"

Life is..... 'To be lived moment by moment'

Family is... 'where love is'

I strongly believe in... 'Myself'

Family for me... 'is the tie that binds'

The most important thing I do on Sunday... Catch up on reading and watch music videos.

I deal with setbacks by... accepting the reality and taking situations head-on. If that doesn't work - manoeuvre around it and move on.... don't let the situation stall what I want to achieve.

3 things I never leave home without... A smile, sense of gratitude and the ubiquitous mobile!



make everyone happy. Therefore, taking decisions that benefited the larger percentage of the resources and the common good of the organization, at the cost of a few disappointments has always fared better. Most of the disappointments can be managed up to a point and thereafter, it is only prudent to simply move on.

Thirdly, I need to share that successful managers are not just those who learn to excel at dealing with their team. They must also learn to manage their stakeholders. As great interaction skills smoothen functioning; stakeholder

In brief

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 TITLE : AVP and Head HR
 AGE : 53
 ORGANIZATION : MobME Wireless Solutions Ltd
 EXPERIENCE : 30
 YEARS IN HR : 21 years in the Army 'living' HR
 and 9 years of corporate HR
 EDUCATION : M.Sc. (Weapon Systems) and
 AFP from IIM, Ahmedabad.

management also plays a major role in individual's growth trajectory in surprisingly unpredictable ways.

How has working across industries made your professional journey more interesting?

The Army turns men out of boys by training to endure the physical and mental challenges in adverse conditions and grooming a well-rounded personality. More than a profession, Army is a way of life. This imbibed trait helped me to take on the corporate challenges with ease, while I was making a focused effort of detuning from the nuances of a hierarchical structure of the

Armed Forces to a flat and informal structure apparent in the Corporate. The importance of taking off the

UP, CLOSE AND PERSONAL

What inspired you to steer your career towards HR?

I spent the initial 21 ½ years of my career in the Indian Army where HR was a way of life. From a young officer till I commanded an Artillery outfit, the training, aspiration, motivation, logistics, welfare and growth of the 'man' behind the 'weapon' was the core objective. I always learnt that no amount of technology can be the cutting edge unless the 'human' behind it is well taken care of to be responsible for ensuring so. I realized the importance of this human element and the need for excellence in leadership as an essential ingredient to be successful in any organization. Also, I realized that I could connect with people across the spectrum, and, the ability to handle people related complexities, and making the difference was the driving force while taking up HR in the corporate arena.

How do you like to spend your free time?

As a leisure activity, the first option is always listening to music or watching music videos. I am fond of reading self-improvement books and observing people. Of late, I am experimenting with meditation, fitness and well-being. I also catch up with friends and socialize when time permits.

Could you share some of your experiences during your travel to different places? What do you gain from these experiences?

I have travelled across the length and breadth in India owing to posting in the Armed Forces and spent 2-3 years in various terrains such as high altitude mountains, plains, deserts, jungles and many cantonments. With the corporate though, it has been metros all along. I could experience India in its true diversity in its various forms of climate, culture, flora & fauna and cuisine, spiced with the pristine purity of a pollution free environment. Army, by its deployment across these myriad locations, gave me an opportunity to interact with multiple cultures, and enjoy the beauty of nature, which otherwise costs a fortune. I would sum up the experience as a horizon widener in accepting people as they are, and, that travel makes one wholesome and all encompassing. The close encounters with nature has made me respect the environment to realize the importance of 'live & let live'.

Please share some of your memories from your years growing up.

I was the class monitor throughout my schooling and went on to become the School Leader of two different schools apart from being

elected as the President of Interact Club of Rotary. I realized that leadership and taking on responsibility came as second nature to me, and, I did not have to 'work' to achieve it. This has been the largest influence in choosing Army as a career where I was living leadership right from day one.

What was your learning from the B-School?

My stint with IIM, Ahmedabad touched my life in many ways:

- Getting to 'unlearn' and 'learn' from one of the world's finest management institute is in itself humbling!
- It has taught me the nuances of corporate culture, work ethics and expectation of corporate leadership laterally and vertically, which is different from military leadership in many hues.
- How to navigate through overwhelming deluge of information to get to what I want.
- The importance of staying 'connected' through technology and keeping abreast with professional knowledge.
- Organizational Behaviour and Development sessions interested me a lot.

Has someone from your family deeply inspired your values and growth as a human being?

My parents imbibed the importance of practicing honesty and integrity even when the going gets tough. My aunt, who raised five children as a young widow with a perpetual smile, was a true inspiration for not letting life circumstances get the better of you.

My paternal great grandfather, who was conferred the title of Rao Bahadur, was so progressive in his thinking and introduced the first co-ed school in Tellicherry, Kerala. Another grandfather encouraged his niece to travel abroad for higher studies, and, she was the first lady in the community to do so. I picked up progressive thinking from within our roots.

Whom would you credit in your life as a great influence in shaping the man that you are today?

I am the product of perceptions imbibed from absorbing the good and best practices from everyone with whom I have interacted with. I did this with a conscious effort of not sacrificing my core personality. I was somehow not convinced to follow a 'role model', and always felt that identifying with a role model in some ways restricted undiscovered potential.

HR PERSPECTIVES

Some gaps that HR organizations need to bridge:

- In view of wider geographies and multiple locations, virtual HR is a reality. The sooner we can accept this and function accordingly, the better for us in being an effective HR.
- Actionable, consistent and visible grooming of potential leaders is a must for creating quality leadership pool that directly fuels growth and indirectly aids retention and loyalty.
- Succession planning is not replacement planning. Succession planning should focus across all the levels of spectrum instead of just top leaders. It is also a compelling retention tool for hypo resources.
- HR processes should migrate to cloud based solutions from existing server based platform.
- Training and Development initiatives should be dynamic in tune with the changing times. Classroom sessions and long courses shall soon be passé. It is the WhatsApp and Facebook culture with millennials having short attention spans and keen on micro learning, and, therefore it is essential for the training media to evolve accordingly as well.
- Plan training initiatives that has a measurable ROI.
- Performance Appraisal should be able to identify areas of development and flexible enough to be purpose driven rather than being a mere annual assessment and compensation tool.
- Grooming of young HR leaders is an area left to evolve on its own steam rather than making a conscious effort. I would like to share the following experience for budding aspirants in the HR domain:
 - It is important to be a 'fair' rather than a 'populist' or a 'nice' HR professional. This calls for non-conformist stand sometimes and requires convincing your stakeholders if it so demands.
 - Keep yourself well read on the latest trends in the HR profession.
 - HR processes should be easy to implement and meaningful rather than just a chore. Avoid template solutions.... "I did

this in the previous company and therefore should work here too ". Keep it easy and fun to implement and reduce 'form' filling exercise as much as practically possible.

- Endeavour to take metric based HR decisions and use a fine combination of the heart and mind when there is a conflict.
- Avoid being an extremist when tending to tilt between 'employees' & the 'organization'. A fine sense of balance is essential and this 'balance' is not taught or written anywhere - it is learnt by application of mind and heart - some call it experience!
- Remember you are a HR 'rep' whether off or on the field - so watch your conduct and behaviour - always.
- When you are passionate about your job, your ability to handle the challenges is relatively easier and with less stress. This directly/indirectly reflects positively on your performance. Your stress levels spike when you work for the sake of working. I read this somewhere - "Whenever you run the extra mile with passion, usually there are no traffic jams" - so true!

Common errors companies commit while designing engagement practices:

- Post the fanfare and announcements of engagement initiatives, the effort fades due to lack of commitment and persistence across all levels of implementation.
- Lackadaisical attitude of business leaders in implementing engagement initiatives.
- Engagement practices seen more of a HR responsibility than a company/team responsibility.
- Engagement initiatives not followed up with clearly defined workable follow-ups.
- Engagement activities not in sync with the culture of the company.
- Engagement initiatives seen as a chore rather than implementing it with passion.

baggage of seniority along with its associated 'ego' is crucial to find acceptance in the world outside the uniform. This transition was the most interesting as the corporate loves the discipline and the methodical execution of a soldier, but detest authoritarian regimentation. A fine blend with the least possible turbulence is the order of the day!

After getting my orientation refined from IIM-A, I took up Admin and Security at one of the largest plantation company in Cochin in South India, followed by heading the HR Centre of Excellence of a casino software R & D company at Chennai

and Bangalore. Although, both were diverse industries, I found the ingredients required for leadership as the common spine to both. The work culture, the ethos, the expectation of stakeholders, etc. are distinctively diverse. However, the core requirement of tenacity and persistence of purpose, excellence in execution, people skills with the ability to connect across the spectrum, are skills that are all pervasive.

One of the traits that helped me immensely was the ability to connect with all age groups with diverse backgrounds. The plantation was more of the old school of thought

experimenting with trending management techniques with most employees who are in the noon and sunset of their lives; whereas, in casino R & D and MobME, they are predominantly effervescent youngsters who believe in what is 'trending'- professionally and personally.

How different have been the two experiences for you - of setting up HR from the scratch in an organization to managing well-established HR frameworks?

In my case, it is the other way round. I gained tremendous grass root and

strategic experience in the functions of employee engagement, organization development, recruitment, compensation from well-established HR directives of global environment as part of the HR Team of Bally Technologies.

I am honing this experience to evolve HR processes tailored to suit the startup environment of MobME. This challenge of preparing the resources to the next level of excellence, while retaining the frenzied yet cool startup culture is akin to conducting a classical fusion composition by a virtuoso rock band.

The transition does have its share of a few notes going astray, but the aim of keeping the orchestra playing on is interesting and "I'm loving it".

Having been associated in various sectors for a significant amount of time, what is your understanding of the business? Were there any sector specific challenges and opportunities you experienced?

HR needs to be closely involved with the evolving business to understand the qualitative requirement of the

Awards and Accolades

- Awarded Chief of Army's Commendation for effective management of Military World Games Cell in 2007.
- Won numerous Inter-school and State Awards in athletics.

hires to take on the challenge of the anticipated business goals and growth. It also important for HR to evaluate the existing talent pool, and, identify the areas of improvement in the skill set to match the next level of business growth. In such a scenario, the HR business partner model goes a long way in blending the business imperatives with the HR initiatives.

The plantation company was a well-disciplined organization with traditional cultures still at fore, and, implementing modern management techniques with due regard to prepare for change. The casino industry is customer sensitive and constantly adds creativity to their products to sustain and stay ahead of the herd.

BUZZER ROUND

- **A mysterious benefactor wrote a cheque for Rs. 10, 00,000 and said 'Help me solve a problem'. What would you say?**

First define the problem! Next, it depends on my willingness, advisability and capability to solve the problem...not necessarily in the same order!!

- **What is the one thing you are proud of but would never put on your resume?**

Integrity and sincerity. Both cannot be explained or proved in a resume!!

- **What is the one dream that you have tucked away for the moment?**

To mentor underprivileged teenagers on personality development and prepare them for a successful career.

- **Is there something that people constantly ask for your advice? What is it?**

By my profession and ability to empathize, most of the advice sought hovers around relationship situations and how to handle them.

- **When was the last time you astonished yourself?**

When I danced the night away in a recent do Long time since I have done that : !

- **What do you value most? Free time, recognition or money?**

In today's pace, free time is difficult to get ! I get a real kick doing what I want to do in free time.....that's where the real high is compared to recognition and money.

- **Are you living your life purpose or still searching?**

My life purpose is to achieve the capability to live in the 'present'. This is a concept I have come across my life in various packages & forms from almost all forms of teachings. It indeed is a 'wow' moment when a fine sense of balance is experienced irrespective of how adverse a situation is! I realized that this is no philosophy...just a practical way of living a wholesome life!!

MobME is a bold startup that is currently dealing with verticals on big data customer experience analytics, digital banking labs focusing on BFSI and fintech products and services and network solution partners of telecom. They concentrate on the strategic objective of peaking a business with cutting edge technology solutions with the least turnaround time. This happens with an insatiable thirst for seizing opportunities presented by the environment.

All these diverse businesses offer sector specific challenges to HR in terms of the type of hires, understanding the industry dynamics, competition, and business to derive the right type of training, compensation, welfare, organizational development and retention initiatives.

As for the opportunities, MobME has an enviable attrition record, which is currently in decimals. This is largely due to the intense engagement and loyalty owing to the unique work culture created by its BU heads and their teams. For instance, we do not track leaves, have flexi hours, and, encourage beating dead-lines without laying down strict office timings. We do not subscribe to 'Fun @ Work', instead it is 'fun working'! Typical corporates will find this successful 10-year-old start up company's state of professional nirvana difficult to understand. It can only be experienced!

Who have been your figures of inspiration during this professional journey? What values and ideologies do you believe leaders should walk the talk to win the confidence of the stakeholders?

I have carefully imbibed the best of leadership experience from my mentors and well-meaning colleagues. After-all, I cannot be making all the mistakes in life! I learnt well thought out lessons through the experience of others. I believe it is crucial for a leader to walk the talk as his credibility and reputation for sticking to his word can crumble so badly that it becomes extremely difficult to salvage thereafter. In fact, it will threaten his very sustainability. Some of the values and ideologies which I believe as a leader, irrespective of industry and position, should consider

while walking the talk are:

- It is essential to think big, but, it is equally important not to bite more than what one can chew.
- Adverse situations/setbacks are unpredictable despite all possible foresight and contingency plans. The ability to bounce back and motivate the team in spite of the setback is of paramount importance. Winners usually belong to this category.
- Conflict situations are inevitable where people interactions are concerned due to perceptual and expectation mismatch. The equanimity to let go after a point and focus on moving on for better pastures stands a greater chance of sustainability than being a vanquished hero.
- Bad news doesn't get better with age! Be candid to admit failures and setbacks and at the same spell out an action plan to retrieve the situation.
- Communicate frequently to keep the employees engaged. At MobME, we have monthly town halls in a very informal way in which the C-suite share their ups and downs with emphasis on forward looking updates.

"Unleash the potential that is in another, and you unleash the potential that is in you" - Matshona Dhliwayo. What are your views on the same, and how have you practiced this during your stint with various organizations?

A lot of people are unaware of their own true potential. Even if they have an inclination, they prefer to stay within the inertia of their 'comfort zone'. I happen to come across resources who are condemned to 'not working out' and 'let go' seems to be the only convenient option per their boss.

Upon closer introspection, I find that if you go the extra mile to get to know the person and the situation, you could possibly find unleashed potential which can be groomed and nurtured to get the best out of that person. It requires investing an open mind, patience, leadership and mutual participation. I could get demotivated employees, employees who were under performing due to poor

LEARNING POINTS

- Everything in life, whether professional or personal, is temporary - this too will pass - therefore, I never let a situation dominate my core balance.
- Every problem has a solution - we just need to look for the right one and accept it with an open mind...it need not compete with expectation!
- The time spent on forethought, planning and meticulous execution helps save a lot of time, money and resources in implementation.
- Have the equanimity to understand that people are never good or bad - they just react that way depending on a situation and their perception at that moment.
- Always amplify good in someone and downplay their bad. It encourages positive behaviour & response.
- Listen...listen.... listen! - We stand a better chance of communicating effectively when we make a conscious effort to listen. Avoid the tendency to respond even before the other person is yet to finish the sentence!!!
- Life is a lot easier when we rely on inner strength.

leadership/lack of proper grooming, going through personal crisis, etc. to overcome their drawbacks and emerge winners. Unfortunately, we find a lot many managers give up on their team mates just because they do not find it convenient to work on their employees - they would rather let go and hire someone else. I learnt this lesson well from the Army - where I was taught to carry my team with me irrespective of the individual shortcomings - I simply do not have

the option to let go a soldier and hire another one - I rather learn to get the better out of him, and in the process, I learnt to bring out my own leadership and discover creative and unexplored ways of turning around a person. And, this has worked amazingly well in the corporate world as well.

As part of the MobME family, what will be your focus for 2017? Any organizational goals that have been set by you?

MobME is a 10-year-old company that has excelled consistently over the years, and their DNA is sustaining success while retaining the startup culture. We have ambitious plans to significantly scale up the value in the next few years.

To help achieve this objective, I keep an eye on the following:

- Ensure quality hires that works as a force multiplier. It is better to hire someone who is more competent as compared to two average hires.
- QoQ reviews function as effective measures to apply mid-course corrections in tune with change dynamics - and, more so, in our industry.
- Implement a transparent compensation plan that fosters Pay for Performance and a healthy competition.
- Set goals and KPIs that are in tune with the business trajectory and is challenging as well as attainable.
- Design simple and robust Performance Management System to align with business goals.
- Continue to sustain the culture and brand loyalty to keep the attrition rate at less than 1 %.
- Bring in subtle process changes without creating undue turbulence to the startup culture.

HC

CORRIGENDUM

In the story **People Analytics: The Past, Present and Future** (Mar'17) the name John Bersin may be read as Josh Bersin.
In the story **Moving Away From Traditions** (Mar '17) Suresh Raina's position may be read as Managing Partner, Hunt Partners.
In the story **The Journey To Tomorrowland** (Mar '17) Bhavin Turakhia's position may be read as Co-Founder and CEO, Zeta.
The errors are regretted