

Conflict Resolution and Personality Deviations in the Work Environment

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Abstract - This paper analyses the behaviour of an individual at a very high post in a corporate work setting. It is a case study written on his personality and problem solving skills in both – his personal life and professional life.

(Please note that no real names were used in this case study to protect the privacy of the people and companies involved)

Key Words: negotiation skills, personality, behaviour, non-verbal cues, corporate setting, conflict resolution

1. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this report is to have a second-hand experience of the corporate world and enhance our communication skills. To do so, we interviewed Mr Varun Sharma, Senior Vice President of Materials and Project Development at Hotels Company Limited*. Through research and analysis, we hope to broaden our understanding of corporate conflicts and how the professionals deal with them.

The information gathered by us like organizational problems, communication barriers and personality types coupled with our learnings in the subject of Effective Communication provides an impetus to analyse corporate situations beyond face value and use our studies in the practical world.

The objective is to know about the employee's personality and how it affects his performance in the organisation.

2. Body of Paper

Case Study

Mr. Varun Sharma is a lover of nature and the outdoors. He regularly participates in marathons and trekking expeditions. When he cannot find time for these activities, he resorts to playing golf on the weekends with his friends. Daily, he takes out half an hour from his busy schedule to go through his exquisite record collection and play some of the classics on the record player for himself. His 18-year-old daughter, Tia*, and wife, Kiran*, are both fond of long drives; thus, to spend some quality time with them, Mr Sharma

ensures that they go out on a road trip somewhere every month. Due to his work hours, he is unable to spend time with his family and friends during the week. He tries to make up for this by taking them out for culturally rich brunches and dinners as they are all foodies too.

He feels that his personality deviates from what he is at home. He says that it is essential to leave the office personality at work and not bring any of it back home. Since he is at a high post, he needs to maintain an air of discipline and authority around him. However, he prefers to let his guard down at his home. He says this is imperative for everyone working in the corporate sector. He can do so by not intertwining his office issues and his personal life. It is of utmost importance to him to maintain a work-life balance, so that he has time to work, relax, spend time with his family and friends and devote time to his hobbies as well.

Mr. Sharma is the senior vice president of materials and project development at Hotels Company Limited (HCL), a DATA Enterprise. He was recruited on campus straight after he completed his CA, over 25 years ago, and has been working there ever since. He is amongst the top 10 executives in the company, having a team of 200 employees working under him. There are a total of 6 verticals. He is under finance, where he handles commercial buying and procurement of materials as well as any new plans or projects. The company has 147 working hotels and around 50 in the pipeline. Even though he is at such a senior position, he is very down to earth and friendly towards his subordinates. His office is made in such a way that all the employees are at the centre of the space in their cubicles and the senior executives have glass cabins around the corners. The reason behind such a set up is the ideology of an open office where nothing is hidden. This ensures that the seniors in the organization are easily approachable and both lines of hierarchy maintain transparency.

His approach to the job is rather liberal. Being a part of the service industry, over the years he has learnt that human desires are ever-evolving and a group of 10 individuals cannot determine what would work in the market and what wouldn't. Due to this, he believes that once a project is 60-70% ready, it should be launched in the market so that corrections can be made according to customer feedback.

During the course of his journey in HCL, his interpersonal relationships with his colleagues have increased and now extend beyond his professional sphere. His job comprises finding the most suitable and best quality materials at the most economical rates, while also maintaining the standards of the various 5-star hotels under his organization. As a result of this, he has to interact with new people on a daily basis and be in constant link thereof for business purposes. Consequently, he encounters several personal dilemmas regarding the means of procurement of materials. He finds himself in a quandary more often than not.

When we went to interview Mr Sharma, he greeted us with a firm handshake and offered us food and drinks as he knew that the drive to his home was quite long. He even cracked jokes about Mumbai traffic to ease any tension and break the ice. He had a very open and welcoming aura. When we finally asked him to narrate an incident where he was facing a conflict, his attitude and body language underwent a drastic change- he took breaks to think before he said anything, he crossed his arms, he was getting uncomfortable and he tried avoiding certain questions as he said that the information required for the answers was confidential. He didn't want to express a lot about the situation. It seemed to him that he was treading on thin ice. He even tried to steer the topic of conversation by cracking jokes and asking us a little about our own personal lives.

Last November, Mr. Sharma and his team were brainstorming about the materials to be procured and from whom to procure them in the year 2022 for the various hotels as the company follows a 5-year contractual process when dealing with stakeholders. They were looking for a new supplier of linens as they were facing some payment issues with the current ones and didn't want to continue with them in the new term. When he brought up the issue during the meeting, one of his immediate subordinates, Rajesh Mukherji, jumped at the opportunity to showcase his competence to his senior. He exclaimed that he knew a perfect company to fill in the previous company's shoes. Mr. Sharma, who was under a lot of pressure to finish the report on time, instructed the R&D department to conduct due diligence on the prospective company as soon as possible and come back with a positive result. As most of the other linen companies were already hired by HCL's competitors like Hyatt, Four Seasons, IHG, Hilton, Ritz-Carlton, Marriott, Host Hotels & Resorts, Mandarin Oriental and Accor Hotels, HCL had very limited options. After conducting market research, brand analysis and various quality checks, the R&D dept reported to him and told him that even though they were offering a better price than the others, their product's quality was not up to the mark of HCL standards - standards which are world-renowned.

At DATA Enterprises, a dual salary system is followed wherein the employee's salary is further divided into two segments; one being fixed which consists of 55% of what the employee makes that is pre-decided in the contract, and the other being the variable segment that makes up for the remaining 45%. The variable salary segment is dependent on the employee's performance and the number of goals and targets that they achieve. Thus making it crucial for Mr Mukherji as well as Mr. Sharma to find the suitable linen supplier on time so that they could achieve their targets for the

ongoing period, and in turn, increasing the salary that they would be taking home at the end of the month by a huge amount. This caused an ethical dilemma for Mr Sharma was confused on whether to look out for himself and his subordinate by caving to his self-serving bias or to miss their targets and look for a better and more suitable linen dealer. He has to weigh the pros and cons of finding products matching the standards and quality of the various hotels under HCL and work towards providing the same luxury and comfort that the hotels promise its customers when they book them or prove to be disloyal to the DATA code of conduct by not delivering what is promised to its customers. Being a workaholic, results and agility matter most to Mr Sharma. Even though he was very tempted to indulge in unethical practices, he didn't do so for the values that were instilled in him by his parents and job trainers.

Analysis

The case study is an in-depth understanding of how Mr Sharma as well as HCL functions. It helps us in discovering about the real-life factors that not only have an influence on the communication and conflicts in an organisation but also play a magnificent role in the performance of the organisation. Mr Sharma told that HCL has a tall organisation structure with a lot of rigid hierarchy. Personally, he says the main reason behind working is 'survival', which for him is earning daily bread and having a roof over his and his family. He says that he works to provide for his family and take care of the various responsibilities he has. He has been working in this organisation for 25 years and the ambition to go forward in the organisation and increase his personal skills, knowledge and aptitude are what drive him to report to work other than the primary reason of earning a salary. His friendly attitude and extroverted approach towards life fit perfectly into the requirements of his job where he has to meet new people daily for the procurement of materials and discussion of new projects. During this, he says that he learns a lot. Being at a senior position, Mr Sharma is friendly yet stern as he wants certain things to be his way. He implied so when he said that having worked in this field for a period of 25 years, he knows the ins and outs; thus, putting him at a pedestal to make decisions. He can recognise certain pointers or key areas that the other employees or subordinates might overlook or miss out on. He as an individual is very competitive and this competitiveness is fuelled by two things- achieving goals and productivity.

He said that one of his major strengths is that he is a perfectionist. He says that with this quality he also understands the needs of the business that he is in, and how the service sector is rapidly evolving with consumer needs changing. Hence he believes in a strategy that he calls the '60-70 strategy' wherein he tries to launch a project when it is 60%-70% ready instead of when it reaches perfection. The ideology behind this is adaptation. This enables him to make changes immediately after the launch as per the feedback and requirements of customers. The shift and transition from a 60-70 percent ready project to a 100 percent ready project over a period of time are of utmost importance and is sometimes the key factor in the success of the hotel. This not only saves him time but also money and resources. On the contrary, when asked about his weaknesses he said that he quite often took

shortcuts. He also said that sometimes these shortcuts have backfired on him and he has faced consequences regarding the same. He says that it takes time for one to realise that something is not working out but he also gave us the solution to this and how he tackles the projects that aren't working out. He believes that if something isn't working out, leave it and start something new instead of wasting resources that can be utilised at other places that would, in turn, benefit the organisation. His behaviour during this conversation changes from a positive, proud manner when asked about his strengths to a more reserved one when asked about his weaknesses. He folded his arms, looked around and thought a lot to find the answer that was more suitable in the context of this interview.

When talking about how his organisation functions he said that they have five-year plans that are divided into quarters. There are 20 quarters in all and the work needs to be balanced out in all 20 of these. It is not possible for the organisation to achieve targets in a few and then have a lax attitude for the remaining months, they have to try to achieve their targets in all the quarters. Consistency is key. Thus Mr Sharma calls it a marathon where you need to be persistent and push yourself with every step you take. You need to pace yourself in a manner which gives you a competitive edge. You cannot exhaust yourself and your resources in the start, leaving you handicapped in the end. You have to beat everyone to the finish line and end your race with grace. Long-distance running and marathons are also a hobby of his, making this analogy a perfect example to describe his work life. He blends the two marathons, metaphorical and literal, quite well.

The plans are made on an annual basis with quarterly checks on where they stand regarding the completion of the project. When asked about the organisation structure he said that the organisation practised a tight hierarchy. He said this sometimes causes delays in communication and decision making, but it still did not lead to inflexibility because of the open office atmosphere. Training in HCL takes place mostly for junior positions mostly. Mr Sharma said that training is rarely held for senior executives. The only training for them is workshops and seminars on managerial decisions and overall development. Whereas the workers of the various hotels under HCL go through various training sessions to improve their skills; thus, increasing their productivity. These training programmes are PAN India. The staff training is need-based and is only done when they need to learn a new skill or improve their performance. Other than that various team building training activities are undertaken regularly.

Cultural barriers arise when people of different cultural backgrounds work together but not in unison as there are a few restrictions or limitations like status, resistance or language barriers. According to Bennet's Model, broadly, there are two types of thought processes - Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism is negative where the person is either in 'denial' of the barriers, 'defensive' where he acknowledges the barriers and 'minimization' where he actively tries to suppress his acknowledgement of barriers. Then comes Ethnorelativism where there's 'acceptance' of the barriers, the relative shift in the attitude in order to 'adapt' to the barriers for smooth functioning and lastly, 'integrating'

where steps are taken to curb the barriers and have a harmonious environment at the workplace.

Mr Sharma has the first-hand experience of facing several cultural barriers. His job entails meeting business partners from different countries and regions and developing deep, enduring relationships with them that mutually satisfy their needs. However, more often than not, Mr Sharma finds himself in a predicament where he, or the opposite party, is unable to clearly communicate their needs; thus, resulting in a scuffle.

He gave us two examples, one of the West and the other of the East. He says the west has preconceived notions about Indians. Along with racial concerns, they have a superiority complex where they believe that they are more developed and better at conducting business as opposed to Indians. They are always trying to undermine him and portray an attitude that suggests Mr Sharma should feel privileged as the West is doing him a favour by doing business with him He says that these kinds of business deals need to be dealt with diplomatically. On the contrary, the East has a more accommodative approach towards Indians. They are more willing to do business with Indians and as per Indian standards. Mr Sharma always tries to maintain a balance between his interest and those of the other parties, irrespective of where they belong. His negotiation style is integrative instead of disintegrative, where he would rather extend the pie for synergy and not distribute it. Before a meeting with a foreign party, he studies their culture thoroughly and learns a few basic terms in their native languages. This helps him greet them in a way that develops a deeper bond. He also interacts with them beforehand via the internet so that the nerves are reduced when they meet for the first time. A secret tip he gave us was to always have a joke or an interesting fact ready in mind to break the ice or monotony and start the meeting on a lighter note, just like he did with us. While talking about the above he seemed a bit passive-aggressive as though he was annoyed by their behaviour but there's nothing he could have done about it. He was trying to suppress his aversion towards the foreign way of doing business. He was constantly sighing and rolling his eyes and tried to avoid talking about it.

According to our research and analysis of Mr Varun, we concluded that he belongs to the Myers Briggs Type Indicator of ESTP category - Extraversion (E), Sensing (S), Thinking (T), Perception (P). He is an energetic thrill seeker who is at his best when putting out fires, whether literal or metaphorical. He brings a sense of dynamic energy to his interactions with others and the world around him. He assesses situations quickly and moves adeptly to respond to immediate problems with practical solutions. Active and playful, ESTPs are often the life of the party and have a good sense of humour. They use their keen powers of observation to assess their audience and adapt quickly to keep interactions exciting. Although they typically appear very social, they are rarely sensitive; the ESTP prefers to keep things fast-paced and silly rather than emotional or serious.

Transactional Analysis is a psychoanalytical theory and method of therapy wherein social transactions are analyzed to determine the ego state of the patient (whether

parent-like, childlike, or adult-like) as a basis for understanding behaviour.

Parent self: It is a state in which one acts, thinks or speaks with the learned patterns of their parents or some important authority figure from childhood. They taught us what is right and what is wrong, how to live, to feel, what to believe. All this was recorded and within each person, there is an “inner parent”. Depending on how we were treated, that figure could be critical, as an inflexible, strict, authoritative, angry, serious, rigid, judgmental, guilt inflicting parent... Or if we were lucky enough to have nurturing parents when we are in the Parent ego state, we will conduct ourselves in a flexible, helping, flattering, cooperative way, providing positive reinforcement, etc. It all depends on the patterns we have learned in childhood. Your parent ego state is like a copy of what you saw and copied in your childhood.

Adult self: It is the most rational and realistic state. A state where information is analyzed, sorted and the decision believed to be most accurate is made, without being influenced by emotions or rules. It focuses on “what must be done” and not “what you want to do”. Adult reactions are ideal for any conversation to be fluent and positive. It is the state that reduces conflict and returns the well-being to situations. The adult is the one who thinks and reasons in a realistic way. The other two states of parent and child, are more dominated by emotions and automatic reactions. A person who is acting from an adult state will appear sincere, human, respectful, flexible, emphatic, decisive. It is the most rational and efficient state because It is based on logic without letting emotions cloud intelligent thinking.

Child self: It is the part that is mostly dominated by desires, impulses, dreams, spontaneity, creativity, enthusiasm. It is the spontaneous part and the part for natural impulses. The child self, if damaged, has its insecure, shameful, fearful, cruel, selfish side. We respond from this state as we did when we were kids; with a high degree of fantasy and little rationality. It is not negative to bring out this state. Repressing our inner child has negative consequences. You have to let it out, feel, have fun. If you take care of it instead of repressing it, the adult part will develop in a healthy way. We all carry the child we were inside of us. Normally we all have the three ego states and we change depending on how we feel, how we are treated, and the situation we find ourselves in. You can change from one state to another in a matter of seconds.

Reiterating our previous point of Mr Varun maintaining a dual personality, he has two ego states - ADULT state at work and CHILD state at home. He needs to maintain a calm and composed attitude at work even in the harshest of circumstances. He cannot let his emotions get the best of him. However, at home, he can let his guard down. He says that he and his family get into quarrels about the smallest of things and he hates losing. He is also very protective of his wife and his daughter, sometimes an unreasonable amount.

Mr Varun sat along with his subordinate Rajesh Mukherji* to discuss what they should do and how they should act while going forward. While discussing this, another minute conflict of interest was observed. Mr Mukherji wanted to go ahead with the unethical practice of giving the contract to the sub-standard linen dealer in order to earn a higher salary

and maybe even a promotion. However, Mr Sharma was not in favour of this as he had been reflecting on what he should do for days. He valued loyalty to his job and conducting ethical business practices over a mere increase in his salary. He decided what was right for the organisation and did not go forward with the contract. He asked other members of his team to look for other dealers that weren't already taken, even if it would mean waiting another few months. He took this decision as he had higher authority in his vertical. Even though he believed in distributing authority to his subordinates and giving them equal opportunities, he realised that some important decisions need to be taken independently and the bigger picture must be taken into consideration when the stakes are higher. While narrating the above, Mr Sharma had a grin on his face and he spoke with exuberating confidence. It was clearly visible that he was proud of himself and the decision he had taken. Problem solving is an integral part of any and every conflict that takes place in an organisation. It helps the parties in conflict think about the problem from various point of views to make the correct decision unanimously. Mr Sharma said that often, if not always, conflicts result in accommodative stances, where disagreements are smoothed over and the ultimate goal is a state of peaceful coexistence. In this case, Mr Varun used forcing technique of conflict management wherein the conflict was suppressed through a higher authority for the greater good of the entire organisation.

According to Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory, there exists a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. Needs lower down in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up. From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Mr Sharma's bottom needs physiological, safety, belongingness and esteem are already satisfied as he is at such a senior position, leaving room for him to only work towards satisfying his self-actualisation needs whenever possible. Thus decisions of such morality help him in achieving and fulfilling these needs. He was now content with himself, which is imperative.

In the end, he gave us a talk about how sometimes even when the ethical path might not seem the easiest and most obvious course of action, it should always be the path you walk upon.

3. CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing, we have deduced a few things. One - that crises can be both major and minor but they all are equally important to the organization, and two - in order to maintain a healthy balance, one has to develop a dual personality for his personal and professional life. Analyzing the various ego states, communication styles, barriers to communication and conflict management has made us aware of every individual is unique and has their own personal ways of interpreting things. Thus, it is of utmost important that we remain sensitive towards our environment and others' needs in order to work efficiently and effectively.

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