
Performance Paradigms

As Ravi entered the Regional Office, he hardly noticed the rows of bicycles parked in the parking shed. Ravi's mind was churning out and evaluating the possible outcomes of a difficult decision in the matter of Girish Rane.

Ravi Apte was the Territory Manager for a leading MNC pharmaceutical company - OXY Limited. He was managing the district of Raigad for the past six months (i.e., from June'2002) and was leading a team of seven Sales Officers. He had consistently achieved and exceeded the targets for his region. He was considered as a person who could make anybody see reason and who could extract work from anybody through the power of reason. He was considered as a tough taskmaster who was hard when it came to achieving targets. Yet he had the reputation of a reasonable man who is sympathetic to others and their problems. He was never found guilty of playing favorites. He was hailed to be one of the fairest and simplest people around. Although he had his share of differences with others in the organization, everybody appreciated him as a very open person as well as a person who used to thrive on relationships. There was not one blemish on his career of 8 years with the company.

Last Sunday, Ravi was relaxing at home and on answering the doorbell, was pleasantly surprised to see Jayant and his wife Nalini at the door. Jayant was an old friend who was passing by and decided to drop in for a visit and a chat. Their friendship stretched way back to the days in 1994 when they were both in a Pune college together. Ravi took up a career in the Pharma Industry, and Jayant took up a career in HR in the FMCG Industry. And as luck would have it, today they were both in OXY Limited. Jayant was the HR Manager for employee Training and Counseling in the company.

A while later, after the snacks were over, they both sat reminiscing over their lives, while the women busied themselves with other matters. After a few updates about each other's life, Jayant noticed the uneasiness in Ravi's voice. Jayant would normally leave things alone and let them settle down on their own. But Ravi was a friend and he was concerned about what was bothering him.

"Hey Ravi, something's not right with you. It seems that you are lost in some thoughts. Although I have read the files you have sent me, but still, I would like to hear about it from you. Is there anything I can do to help? New territories are difficult for the most experienced of Territory Managers and Raigad is known to be difficult as doctors are spread thinly out over large areas of land. How are things getting along for you?"

“Yes, you are right Jayant. There are a few things bothering me and that’s why I’m glad you are here so that I can discuss it with you. As you know, I have just taken charge of this territory a few months back. The first thing I did when I came here is to meet all the Sales Officers in my team. I have a total of seven Sales Officers in my team. What we did was chalked out the situation in the territory and reviewed the targets and achievements. I personally spent several days working in the field with each Sales Officer to get to know the area from his perspective, and also to meet some of the key doctors and retailers in the region.”

Jayant knew this very well. “Knowing your way of working, that’s pretty much what you do at every new challenge, at every new place – assess the current situation and then draw short term and long term plans.”

“That’s right Jayant. We did all right in chalking out the plans and setting ourselves targets. Everything went as per plans except for one Sales Officer – Girish Rane. When I met him during the target setting meeting, he came across as quite friendly, well mannered and very polite – all that goes into making a good Sales Officer. In addition to that, his qualifications spoke lots about his intellectual capacity. Besides his basic qualifications he had a degree in Law and also had a Diploma in PR management. On looking through his records I found an occasional adverse remark against him from some of the earlier Territory Managers. But, mostly, his personal file did not say anything too positive or too negative about him.”

“However, to my surprise, he was not able to meet his monthly targets on six occasions out of the ten months that have passed by. At the first instance, I thought that it might just be one of those cyclical swings and hence I just ignored it. But when it happened for three months in a row, I personally called him for a discussion. I also noticed that he was away from work for almost 10 days during the last two months.”

When he came down, we talked about his performance and his work. He informed me that his wife was not keeping well for some time now. Since we at OXY care for our employees, I offered him any help that we could extend. But at the same time, I advised him that he should not let personal things affect his professional life. He still had to perform and achieve his targets. He said that he also feels the same way and will put in all his efforts to make sure that he achieved the targets from now on.”

“So starting from there, we sat down and charted out targets for him for the next three months. He also assured me that he will achieve all the targets and promised performance. We also agreed to have reviews every fortnight.”

“So that was the end of the matter. At this time, I was in charge of the territory for almost two months and it was time for our bi-monthly meeting to review performances and also to do some team working.”

As Ravi sat there narrating the whole story, Jayant did not wish to interrupt. “Go on.” He said.

Ravi continued, “So I have this meeting with all the Sales Officers present there. And strangely enough, Girish was absent. I asked the other Sales Officers about his whereabouts and nobody knew where he was. Anyway, we went ahead with our meeting and we set targets for all the Sales Officers. Also, we chalked out a timetable of my going out in the field with all the Sales Officers.”

“However, his absence was still bothering me. So at the end of the day, I asked Kunal, our most experienced Sales Officer in the area, about Girish. His reply, surely, was something that I was not expecting. He said that it was not new for Girish to miss such team meetings. He, more often than not, missed such meetings on some pretext or the other.”

“This was a surprise, as personally he didn’t come across as a person who misses out on teamwork. He came across as a very amiable, friendly and dynamic kind of person. He is usually very courteous and takes good care of me whenever I am in the field with him. He gives personal attention to each and every detail in my presence and never misses out on an opportunity to be positive in his outlook.”

“From whatever you have told me till now, there really does not seem to be any problem. Did you get to the root cause of his not achieving his goals? And tell me one thing, how long has he been in the organization?” said Jayant

“Well,” said Ravi, “interestingly enough, Girish has been with the organization for almost ten years now. I was intrigued about him because he is such a paradox. I even spoke with the RBM and the earlier Territory Manager about him. They were both of the opinion that something was wrong with Girish, but could not define the problem. I feel that if he has lasted in the organization for 10 years, then he must be okay. Perhaps I am sensing a problem that does not exist.”

Jayant said, “Actually, his problems just might be temporary. All he might need is some close supervision and lots of advice on working his area. After all, he joined before you and me, and the earlier Training Managers and RBM’s would have tackled the issue. Maybe it is just a figment of your imagination.”

Ravi wanted to continue: “That’s a distinct possibility. But let’s go ahead with the situation now. So I was at the point where he missed his team meetings. Well, soon the date for his first fortnightly review arrived. We were supposed to meet at 10 a.m. in the morning. I also had a lot of other work scheduled for the day including reviews for two other Sales Officers. There was no news about Girish and his whereabouts. At 11.30 he calls up to say that he won’t be able to make it today, as he had to go to Kalyan urgently to see his mother who had fallen ill. So we decided to have a combined review for two fortnights on the next review date. This was at the start of August this year.”

“But later in the day when I thought about it, one thought flashed into my mind, he is not there again! I just wonder whether he was trying to avoid the performance review or his mother was genuinely ill...”

Jayant said jokingly, “Come on Ravi, you are being too harsh on the guy. After all he is with the company for such a long period now. His tenure with the organization surely carries some weight.”

Ravi did not mind the interruption this time, but he was determined to continue. “Maybe you are right. Anyway, we met in the middle of August for his next performance review. This time he came on time and we started with reviewing the targets that we have mutually set. What he said was that he had achieved all of them in terms of the number of calls made and the turnover achieved. When I asked him about the daily reports, he started making all kinds of excuses. First he said that he forgot it at his home. And since he lives nearby, I asked him to get them and meet me after lunch. On that he started saying that some of them are yet to be updated by him. This is when they were supposed to fill it everyday in the evening. I asked him the reason for not filling them and he gave me some vague reasons. Anyway, even after this I asked him to fill in the reports and meet me the next day.”

Jayant wondered whether these were the "warning signs and symptoms" before they become performance problems. He wondered about these symptoms – were these symptoms there before also? Was Girish's behavior not noticed by others? Was Ravi over-reacting? Was he thinking too much? He tried to reason it out within his own mind and kept his ear on what Ravi was saying at the same time.

Ravi said with a note of finality. “And you know what, the next day, Girish didn't turn up. But he did send me the daily reports for the past five fortnights. “

“So he did send across the details. And what did you do with them?”

“Yes. He did send the details. But still there were a lot of problems!”

“What kind of problems?”

Ravi elaborated, “There were a few. The first one was that reports for a few days were missing. The second problem was that there were a few doctors whose names were repeated and that too under different pin codes. There was a third problem also. Some of the reports were incomplete in terms of details of the doctor's responses and the follow up done.”

“But isn't that what many Sales Officers do? I thought it was a common practice.” said Jayant, still thinking that Ravi was over-reacting. But Ravi did not think so. He insisted that there was something missing in the way Girish worked.

“Okay, just suppose that Girish was a problem case. Did you do anything about it?” Jayant enquired.

Ravi confessed that the case of Girish had been festering for some time now. The earlier Territory Manager was known to be soft on people and would never take hard decisions. Perhaps Girish was able to pull the wool over his eyes and make him believe that he was actually working well. “Well, since all this was happening the first time in front of me, I sent him a memo bringing all these points to his notice and asked him to rectify them immediately. Also, I advised him not to let such things happen in the future. This was at the start of October. And he had just missed the targets set for any of the past five fortnights. Although on two occasions, he did come close to them. It’s sometimes hard to say whether the sales is sluggish due to recession in the market or whether the Sales Officer is being slack on the job.”

“Girish showed progress in the first fortnight of October. It looked like all the pushing was having some effect on him and he was improving. He achieved his target for the first fortnight. And he submitted his reports on time – completed and updated.”

“Those were good signs, weren’t they?”

“Yes Jayant, indeed those were. And that raised my hopes about Girish turning a new leaf. But I guess it was just a flash in the pan. The next fortnight, he missed his targets. He was missing from the next bi-monthly meeting. And his reports were invariably late. He needed reminders for many jobs that were assigned to him, otherwise, he would forget. He missed a lot of meetings for some reason or the other. Sometimes, he himself fell ill, sometimes his wife, and at other times people to fall sick were his children, his parents. Each time his difficulties seemed to be really genuine.”

Jayant debated, “Those reasons might be valid.”

“Yes, indeed those reasons can be very valid. But not when these reasons lead to a person taking forty five days off in six months. And also, every time it was a new doctor. It seems that he never went to the same doctor twice. Anyways, it was almost four months now and these hiccups continued. That was when I decided that it was time for getting strict. I sent a memo in writing to Girish setting up a meeting in the middle of November. The memo also described the agenda of the meeting.”

“Girish did turn up for the meeting which was scheduled in the evening so that he could have finished his visits for the day and his day would not be wasted. He was very casual in his language and he was wearing *chappals*. I knew that he was just coming from a sales call to the doctor, and was surprised to see that the Detailing Bag - which every Sales Officer is supposed to use – was missing. When I quizzed him about the bag, he said that he did not carry it because he had to come to meet me after the doctor’s visit was over.”

“I don’t know what really happened to his Detailing Bag, because, subsequently, when I missed seeing it again, he told me that he had lost it in some union strike three months back and was still trying to retrieve it. That can only mean that he was lying to me earlier”

“When I asked him, ‘How do you then distribute the samples and other giveaways to the doctors?’. He took out samples from his pocket and kept them on the table saying that he carried them in his pocket. It was convenient to keep them that way during the long bus rides and it served the purpose of demonstrating to the doctors.”

“I told him that this was not the way in which one is supposed to represent the company. Also, I instructed him to retrieve his bag at the earliest.”

“Then came the topic of his below average performance. He promised that whatever has happened will not happen again and that he will improve his performance. And that’s where the meeting ended. I thought we had a good action plan and commitment for improvement from his side as well.”

“And then I get this shocker from the Head Office saying that they have received a representation from Girish about my playing favorites and singling him out as my target. About my harassing him with constant supervision and about me being a tyrant. This was followed by the visit of the National Sales Manager, Ranjan Basu.”

“Ranjan and Girish had a meeting as well. Girish was communicating quite easily with Ranjan. He started citing his long association with the company, the fortnight(s) when he met his targets, and the times when he was rated as a potential performer. The meeting ended with me, and Mr. Basu counseling him again. We also set targets together for the next few fortnights. The meeting went on smoothly till it came to reviewing the performance of Girish. He went on the defensive from the very moment his performance was brought out for discussion.

“And what happened after that? Did Girish improve?”

“For a few days, yes. But in a week or so, he was again at his old habits of not submitting reports, taking frequent leaves, and not attending meetings. No number of reminders worked. He continued in his old ways with periodic and temporary improvements.”

“And then he did it. He sent a representation to California under the company’s Open Door Policy saying that I was harassing him and I was creating trouble for him. This was the last straw. I have never done this to anybody in my whole career. Can you please take this guy away from me? Can you please just transfer him to some other territory? This is taking its toll on me.”

Questions

1. Is Ravi over-reacting? Give reasons for your answers.
2. If you are Jayant, what advise will you give Ravi?
3. What steps should Jayant have taken as the HR Manager?
4. What steps should Ravi take if the representation was not sent to Head Office & California?
5. Would your answer be any different after representation was sent?
6. Do you think Girish was treated fairly?
7. Could Ranjan Basu have played a bigger role?
8. What do you think is the best course of action for all to take with regards to Girish? Should he be counseled? Should he be transferred? Should he be terminated?