
THE COACHING COUCH

OXY Limited, a multinational pharmaceutical manufacturing and marketing company had been in India for over 25 years now. The early 70's had seen over all growth in the industry. Track records had shown excellent performance over the last few years with sales showing a significant rise over the last ten years. OXY was well known for its excellent management systems and good business practices. During the early years of the company's operations in India, there was talk of the need to expand its operations in line with overall business strategy defined by the California Head Office. It directly meant that there was also a need to increase the manpower along with other facilities. The aim was to reach all the possible corners of the market and that too in the best way they can.

It was thought that if the local people were recruited it would be easy for them to adjust to the job and adapt to the surroundings easily. There was a panel for recruitment and many people were taken in though a well-defined and well-designed selection process. The year was 1972 when Abhijit Sukhdev was selected thorough one such process of recruitment drive along with other men of equal caliber.

Born in a middle class family, Sukhdev had managed to get this job with some hardships. He had completed his school and college studies in a place near Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. His academics were rated as above average during his college life and he was always known to be silent and obedient student, though he did not take part in too many extra-curricular activities. Being academically bright, he did well in the assessment process set up by OXY limited for the post of Sales Officer. However, at the interview stage, one of the interviewers did comment on his lack of gregariousness and his silent nature. The panel overruled this observation and went ahead to recruit him based on the scores of the assessment, saying that it is acceptable for him to be somewhat nervous at the time of the interview and that he will probably make up for his lack of self confidence as and when he gets on the job and gains more experience.

Sukhdev started the job well enough and proved to be comparable to his other colleagues. Everyone was new and there was no differentiation in the working style during and after the induction process. He continued to work at normal levels and the Territory Manager reported no problems with Sukhdev during the evaluation period. After getting well acquainted with the work, it was observed that Sukhdev carried out his work at a slow but steady pace, which was just near average or some times even slightly below average as compared to the other employees that were taken in with him.

After working at the Lucknow branch for 5 years he was then transferred to Varanasi. There was no immediate negative impact on his performance and he continued to work there. In the new surroundings, Sukhdev took a long time to adjust. The doctors and retailers in the area were new to him and he did not know his way around. He missed the old relationships with doctors and retailers he had made at Lucknow. Not being too quick on the uptake, he applied himself to the job and was able to maintain his targets with a great deal of efforts. Very often, his friends were heard to remark that Sukhdev was a very hard worker, but he was not a smart worker when it came to figuring out how jobs were better accomplished. Basically, his nature was that of an introvert who had learnt the job of Sales Officer through sheer hard work.

In terms of targets, he was somehow meeting expectations, but not standing out in the team as a dynamic sort of person who could be relied upon for quick action.

Within a short span of 3 years Sukhdev was again transferred back to Lucknow on the basis of the recommendations of the Territory Manager. Once in Lucknow, there was not much change in his work attitude and culture. Being a steady, silent sort of a person who kept a low profile, he did not stand out and hence did not make it to the list of Sales Officers recommended for promotion.

In the mid nineties, there was talk of global recession. The winds of change were sweeping over the whole world beginning with the collapse of the Asian economies. India was spared the worst of the onslaught, but times were tough. The company did not meet its overall targets in 1997 and there was immediate cause of concern to everyone.

Anil Jain was now the Territory Manager at Lucknow. He had been promoted from the job of a Sales Officer to Territory Manager the year before during the period Sukhdev was posted at Varanasi. Anil called a meeting of to brief the sales team about the troubles that the company was facing. Before closing the meeting he said “According to the latest statistics collected by our research cell in the company, there might be more financial problems in coming year. I should inform all of you about this in advance. The sales targets for this year were not met and there were some other internal problems too, which I can’t mention here. Hence it was felt necessary by the managing heads of our company to take some actions to minimize the problems.”

Every one was also informed that now onwards they needed to put the best of their efforts to prove their ability. They all needed to work hard to get the company back from the recession. The pressure was on all of the Sales Officers to tighten their belts and put in the extra mile. Sukdev was moved by this address and decided to do his best as well. After all, OXY had supported him in so many ways and this was his opportunity to contribute.

The profitability of the company further went down in next year and 1998 was not seen as a good year for the company. It was now necessary to look into the matter closely and deeply. The Marketing Director of OXY, Vikas Ahuja was present at the meeting where it was decided to take a close look at everyone within the company at all levels.

“In my search for the primary problems in company I have identified few areas where we need to work and one of them that first comes to my mind is our frontline employees” he continued by asking opinion of Jayant, their HR head "What do think Jayant?"

Jayant immediately agreed to it by saying “These days I too feel that employees at the market-company interface are not doing that good a job. We really need to do something. However, on second thoughts I don’t think we can put the entire blame on them. After all the overall market conditions are going down and the competition is getting aggressive.”

One of the members from marketing division present added “I think we can’t push the blame entirely on the Sales Officers, the competition these days is getting stiff. There are many new entrants in the market, all trying to push their products. The Sales Team will just get demoralized if we act too tough on targets when there is a general recession in the marketplace. We just have to own up the responsibility and confront the situation headlong. We need to deal with the situation on a war footing.”

After a long discussion and taking everybody’s view into consideration it was finally decided that along with new strategies and products, there should be a close assessment of the value addition from each and every employee working with the company. The company now needed every individual to be its asset and not a liability.

Along with everyone else, Sukhdev was now under the watch glass. The Territory Manager Anil Jain looked into his personal file. Anil noted that there were many instances of under performance by Sukhdev. This was seen as matter to be taken special care of. Anil wondered why this problem was not looked into before. Anil thought that his interaction with Sukhdev was quite dull, and lackluster. In his opinion, Sukhdev was not assertive and confident enough to present himself to a doctor and to make an impact. Sukhdev was more of an introverted personality type who needed to be drawn out in a group situation. In the last monthly meet of all Sales Officers, Sukhdev hardly spoke and was mostly silent. Anil questioned him about this, and Sukhdev replied that most of the Sales Officers in the state had changed in the last few years and he found it difficult to understand the relatively immature younger lot. He was a married man with children, whereas the others were mostly bachelors. He would rather be at home with the family than socialize with them. As a result of this, he did feel left out when all the others came together. However, in his area, he claimed to have a good rapport with most of the doctors and felt he had no real interpersonal problems.

The evaluation matrix, which is followed by the company to assess the performance of an employee, was checked for Sukhdev’s performance. It was noticed that during his years of work at this branch, Sukhdev had a few noticeable below average scores. There was nothing much Anil Jain could do about that. As a part of regular procedure the case was reported to Regional Branch Manager who was also keen to look into the matter. Again there was a thorough scan of all the performance reports of Sukhdev. The reports showed that Sukhdev had only sometimes

been an above average performer. He was just average or below average throughout most of his years of work with OXY Limited.

The Regional Manager Vivek Bahl called up Anil Jain “Where did you get this case from? And how is that we never knew about him?” Bahl was referring to the under-average performance of Sukhdev and according to him it was consistently under required grade.

“No sir that’s not the case” said Anil who tried to explain the scenario “We had noticed him and I even made a point to talk to him, I asked him if he had some problem with anything or anyone, but he said he was ok. I did inform him about his low performance”

“What reasons did he give for his performance?” asked Bahl

“Sir, he has nothing to say, but somehow he has managed to meet at least some of the commitments that he makes at the beginning of the year.”

As Bahl and Anil debated the causes and consequences of Sukhdev’s behavior, they explored many avenues. It might have been possible that Sukhdev was always put into teams that were not compatible with his work style. Perhaps things were not going smoothly with his team members. On the other hand, it was reported by his team members that Sukhdev had no such problems nor did Sukhdev express any such rifts or disagreement with his team members. Or was it that Sukhdev had some point of friction with his superiors? It couldn’t have been that because relation ship of Sukhdev with his immediate senior though was somewhat formal but there was no such conflict reported until now.

Now it was a matter of concern for everyone related to the case. What should be done with Sukhdev? After looking into all the issues of the case, the RBM Vivek Bahl decided that he should talk to the employee himself. Bahl realized that initial attempts to converse with the employees have failed for some reason or the other. He did not want to get deeper into finding out why the earlier attempts were unsuccessful. Bahl made a plan to meet with Sukhdev and talk things over at a personal level where Sukhdev could express what exactly was bothering him. In his first meeting with Sukhdev, Bahl found him to be a subdued fellow and he took a long time be comfortable in front of Bahl. The meek behavior of Sukhdev was something unexpected to Bahl.

The meeting was scheduled at the hotel room where Bahl was staying during his visit. Bahl thought that an office environment would not give a personal touch of the meeting. Sukhdev was not very comfortable about the meeting, but he was informed by the immediate manager that they just want to help him improve himself and it was necessary that he come up and talk freely. Bahl realized that he was going to meet a person who has spent his full career in the same company and had managed to stay for so long.

After initial formal talks Sukhdev started talking about his job and general issues related to his job. After some time Bahl said “Sukhdev, I think I am talking to you as a person and not as RBM so why don’t to speak up and let me know what your real problems are? Is it something to do with you teams or your immediate boss? Come on tell me I will help you out as long as the things are in my hands.”

Sukhdev immediately replied “No Sir! I don’t have any problem with Anil; he has not troubled me in anyway.”

“Then what is the problem?” asked Bahl, to which Sukhdev replied “Sir I don’t know how to approach people at times. It is not very easy for me to come up and talk to other every time. I just have a little problem starting up. Once a relationship is going, then I make very deep friendships” Bahl then informed Sukhdev that soon Anil the Territory Manager will be joining in the discussion and even he would like to know what could be done from his side to help you

After more than hour of conversation with Bahl, Sukhdev felt a bit more self-confident and bold enough to talk to them. Later Anil also joined in and then they sat down to talk in detail about what exactly was happening with Sukhdev. It was apparently learnt that there were some problems with the team with which he had worked for few years. Even though he was not having any personal conflict with the members of team he was somehow not happy with the way they took decisions. All were too busy with their own work and everyone would push forward their own suggestions and decision. He also felt that he was not fit to be in such team. He further added saying “Since last so many years I have not been able to relate personally to anyone in this company. There are no good people around or may be you can see them.”

Bahl asked him “Sukhdev, your performance has not been very good since last 3-4 years, what do you think about that?”

Sukhdev replied in defensive tone “Sir, its not that I don’t perform well, I had undertaken a difficult job to improve sales figures in my area, and I had managed to make a significant increase, but no one seems to have noticed my efforts”. He further continued, “At times I don’t understand how this performance matrix is made, and I feel it doesn’t reflect the time and effort I put into the work. All the notes that go into the records seem to be only the negative aspect of my performance. My good hard work is often taken for granted.”

Bahl and Anil realized there was some problem with this case. The conversation went on for some more time and some more points came up. Bahl and the other managers present listened to Sukhdev as he talked and it ended with Bahl himself assuring him that something will be done. They also told Sukhdev that he should change the way he looks at others and speak with co-workers at a better level. They informed him that they would be looking forward to seeing some improvement in him in coming months and would be happy about it. Sukhdev himself indicated his willingness to work hard and show better performance. Some more action areas for Sukhdev were agreed to before the meeting ended

There was also a possibility that Sukhdev was not comfortable communicating his problem to others. A scan of the feedback sheets by the Regional Branch Manager showed that Sukhdev had communication skills, which were just below the average as compared to the other employees. This was made note of and was also a matter of concern. During past few years Sukhdev had also a record of bad health and health related problems. Other skill such as marketing and sales related information was also found to be below expected level. What was the reason behind it? It was not really that easy to handle this case.

Sukhdev was given more doses of this counseling over the period during which he showed some positive signs and higher level of efficiency in his daily work. His work was monitored and immediate recognition was given to him for every good job done. The Territory Manager was really happy to see a surge in his performance and they encouraged him to work even better. Sukhdev was also happy for the support that he got from his managers. Within some time there was a noticeable change and the performance matrix reflected the indications of a good turnaround. He was working fine with the new team and even the team gave a good feedback. Sukhdev is now one of the top performers and is also a team leader who works with a positive attitude. Though he still has some health problem but that has not affected his work quality, which has certainly gone up.

Questions

1. Analyze the above case and discuss where the problem really was?
2. Do you think that Sukhdev was a misfit in the sales team at Lucknow?
3. Was it the team or any particular member in team that was affecting Sukhdev? Or was it Sukhdev's own natural inhibitions in a group setting.
4. It can also be the case that Sukhdev was just not in good health and that was reflecting in his work. If this was the case why didn't he come up and talk about his problems initially?
5. Did the single session of counseling facilitate the turnaround or it was just sheer effort on part of Sukhdev, which made him realize that he needed to change?
6. What was Sukhdev's role in making himself turnaround?
7. How should such delicate cases be dealt?
8. What are the qualities that are needed in a person who handles such cases?