

TELA CREME

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May you be the contractor
for the next pyramid.
— Ancient Egyptian curse

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Essence of organisation

*Changing company culture involves a thorough churning,
comments HRD Consultant Dr ANEETA MADHOK*

ONE issue that has emerged time and again in these columns and also in professional circles is that of **corporate values and HRD culture**. A frequently quoted case is that of world computer giant — IBM. Thomas J. Watson, Sr founded IBM in 1914 with the uncomplicated statement of three value commitments. "The individual must be respected. The customer must be given the best possible service. Excellence and superior performance must be pursued". Three generations later, it is these time-enduring principles kept alive by his successors — Thomas Watson, Jr and Buck Rogers, that still upholds IBM. In India too, we have several examples of excellence in organisation culture, sometimes brought about by means of conscious Organisation Development interventions, and at other times brought about by clear, positive visions of the organisation percolating down from the top as in several Tata companies like TISCO and TELCO.

While it is irrefutable that rock-solid management principles are essential for long-term growth and sustainability of business, the crucial issue is the process of articulating, communicating, operationalizing and internalizing these tenets of behaviour within the main frame of the architecture of the organisation.

Why is culture building important? In India, a great many organisations grew up with a set of implicit unstated values, largely enshrined in the CEO's working style and followed by precedence and past practice. Some of these organisations have now woken up to the realisation that, in the face of professionalization, global competition, and changing mores of the working classes, the area of building corporate vitality and strength needs attention. Each has its own, unique approach and focus. Are these culture-building activities a manifestation of a mere fashion and do these companies really aim for "corporate glamour", or are their real intentions different? If their real intentions are different, then do these companies operate from genuine strong convictions of building value-based institutions with the objective of creating strong, vibrant cultures where each person can be mentally or spiritually enriched so that

he can individually and collectively contribute his best?

If culture-building is aimed at "corporate glamour" or even as a profit strategy, the entire activity can be self defeating. Human nature being as unpredictable and paradoxical as it usually is, one might agree that profit is the single most important *raison-d'etre* for organisations, but would find it unpleasant to be used as a means towards that end. No matter what the effort put in, it would sooner or later result in internal individual conflicts within people who would see themselves as being manipulated and manoeuvred for material

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ends, resulting in latent undercurrents of dissent, which if not handled appropriately, could be destructive. People would ultimately feel that they were being treated as passengers in the progress of the organisation. A snowballing of such feelings and undercurrents would result in the processes that would ultimately go against the very purpose that the culture building activity set out to achieve in the first place.

This leaves us to believe that culture-building can be successful if the prime movers of this activity (the CEO, the HRD Manager and other functional heads) hold strong genuine con-

victions about the institutions that they aim to build. They should hold sacred the values and principles that they spout. They must demonstrate honesty of purpose (arising out of strong belief systems) in their everyday life, lead by example, and practice what they preach. They must demonstrate extreme patience. Rome, after all was not built in a day. Enculturation of value systems is a slow, painstaking effort with results that may be intangible and difficult to quantify. The most crucial attribute is the ability to deal with and effect intangibles of "soft" issues. They must be able to, by virtue of their personalities, keep the spirit of the cultural values alive.

How is culture-building to be achieved? In my interaction in professional circles, consultants, researchers, academicians and practitioners have described the change process almost universally as one of unfreezing, leading to change, leading to refreezing. The most common analogy is that of a cube of ice melting down and refreezing in the desired shape. This kind of a change model to me, gives the impression of a physical or cosmetic change, where the outward appearance of the organisation is made different. It also implies that there is a logical end to the change process in the refreezing stage and that there will come a time when the change process is complete and the organisation will have "arrived". To that extent this model is stationary, static and physical. In my search for a model which views the change process as organic as opposed to physical, and evolutionary as opposed to stationary, a consultant friend provided a good analogy. He likened the change process to *samudramanthan*, the evolution of the world according to

Hindu mythology where god churned up the seas. On one side was thrown up the *amrit* which consisted of peace, beauty, harmony and the good side of life. On the other side was thrown up the *vish* or poison. While it is true that in organisations *vish* and *amrit* coexist, it is up to the change process to churn the organisation culture in order to polarize the two. The nectar can then be harnessed to fuel the vibrancy of the culture. The poison must, however be dealt with in a constructive manner, such that its destructive effects can be nullified. Only then can synergy be achieved. Such a change process is continuous, ongoing, organic as well as evolutionary.

There are several research-based, proven interventions at the disposal of the change agent. They range from highly structured management systems like Management by Objectives and Quality Improvement Programmes, to the highly unstructured like the T-Group or process interventions which are becoming increasingly popular today. There is however, no universal formula for culture-building. Selection of Organisational Development inputs should be carefully and prudently strategized to be in sync with the OD mission of the organisation. More importantly, the OD inputs should be consonant with the personnel policies and practices of the organisation.

What emerges is that culture-building is an activity which is not to be taken lightly. Thorough introspection by the CEO on the reasons for initiating the process and a well planned out, transport intervention strategy will ensure the results desired.

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