

MYRADA

Rural Management Systems Series
Paper - 14

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HIGHWAY MUSINGS

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Driving on a highway is normally not conducive to dreaming, but the road from Cuddapah early in the morning was clear, the air exhilarating after an overnight shower and Sher Singh next to me was asleep so you now have to tolerate these notes. It all began when I realised that there are 30 managers in MYRADA, all holding responsibilities and the necessary power over men (and women) and matters. The range of this spectrum of managers, however, is large since projects that they manage differ in size from 20 to 200 staff. Budgets also differ and so do donor capacities both in terms of finance and support services. This healthy variety coupled with our efforts to decentralise which has rapidly taken root, could also result in a diversity from project to project that could pull the organisation apart so then here goes.....

- If you feel that your position and status require a "calling bell" on your table, watch out. You'll be an arthritic patient in a short while.
- If you can create a culture in which your juniors can pull your leg and you enjoy it, you are well on the way to creating self correcting mechanisms.
- Most people in padded, push back chairs tend to linger in them, push the seat back and look down on the visitor. They also tend to create an aura of relaxation in an office rather than that of efficiency and drive. (Incidentally, they are not good for piles, or for back problems.) These chairs take longer to get into and out off. In a plane, seats are designed to kill time; in an office they should help to save time.
- An extra large table is no sign of importance; it could indicate a lack of confidence in oneself and reliance on symbols to establish status. It could also mean that you need a barrier to protect yourself from another.
- A clean table is no sign of efficiency. You could also be a postman who has distributed work to everyone without getting a firm grasp of what is the problem and what the solution could be.

- If possible, have your secretarial staff on a different floor - climbing steps regularly through the day will give your heart all the exercise it needs.
- Avoid cluttering your office with papers and books. Clutter is contagious - your mind will catch it.
- Carry papers and letters around to colleagues yourself - they tend to attend more quickly to papers you have handed them personally.
- Do not hold meetings behind closed doors. All those who have a temporary problem with you or those who are by nature suspicious will conclude that you are discussing them, and worse plotting against them.
- If you can establish an atmosphere of open access to colleagues who are themselves in a position of authority but report to you -- you have got your priorities screwed up. The report you give priority to because you have to submit it against a deadline will soon be filed and forgotten; but a colleague in a responsible position, if asked to come later -- after the urgent report is over -- will lose confidence in himself -- the effect will then seep into the area of his/her authority. Reports could quickly take priority over people.
- By the same token, give your time to newcomers -- they need to imbibe the culture of the organisation and in turn feel wanted. Enquire regularly about their progress, visit them at least once a week in their work place during the first month. Arrange for them to visit Bangalore office and another project -- it gives them a feeling that they are part of a larger organisation, and a certain sense of security. Do not be satisfied with a letter of confirmation -- it only tells them that they have a job. Arrange a function and perhaps a gesture which helps them to feel they are now a part of your family and work consistently to strengthen this relationship.
- Be courteous and hospitable to visitors who have positions of authority - in MYRADA, Government and in Donor organisations - but never be servile - you lose respect and so does the organisation.
- Avoid keeping confidential files especially on people - it creates an atmosphere of distrust. I once had a colleague who had this habit - no one told him the truth.
- Do not spend on furnishing your office more than you spend on the offices of your colleagues in the same building. If a visitor walks into the building he/she should not be able to identify easily the room of the boss. If your room is better than those of the others -- watch out ! Others may aspire

to sit in it for the comfort, not for the responsibility; some may even feel that the same holds good for you.

- Spend as much time in the offices of your colleagues as in yours (without being a nuisance) and encourage your colleagues to do the same. If two of your colleagues feel the need to communicate through memos you have a problem which if not sorted out can become serious. People tend to talk more freely in their own office, than in yours. This practice also conveys the message that all the programmes are important. If you are perceptive you may even notice signs that there are underlying problems which have not surfaced as yet. We once had an experience where a department dealing with administrative matters was desperately trying to cope for over a year with a heavy backlog and tried several methods - some not so straight-forward. The boss passed through this office daily since it was next to his ... yet he did not get a feeling that something was not quite right. He had never sat down to talk with the staff of this department.
- If you have a large secretarial pool (and some projects do)... try to do without a personal secretary. She becomes a barrier to your relationship with other staff. Often she will refuse to work for others in your absence; even if she is willing, others may be reluctant to ask her especially if she has been in the job for a long time. Do not appoint a relative as your secretary. Both an established secretary and a relative may be the most efficient persons around; but they become an extension of yourself and hence of your authority; it will be very difficult for them not to use it and for others to pretend it does not matter.
- If you have reached a stage when no one can see you without sending in a "chit" - start looking for another job; your own colleagues will help you.
- Avoid publicity - in the long term it is counter productive, and politics - it is a different ball game and symbolic gestures - do not lay foundation stones, open the building or inaugurate its use.
- Be wary of quick remedies and perfect solutions - they seldom work; the people who offer them have their own motives. By the same token do not allow personal attachments and prejudices to colour your judgement and affect office relationships. Be more demanding on those you like best before they misuse your affection and pull you down with them.
- Do not rush to put up a show for guests. Cows distributed overnight and mushroom nurseries convey different messages; a visitor (if perceptive and experienced) will see through your effort, if he does not, you have wasted your time. The people will impute several motives to your actions most of

them uncomplimentary; they may even consider this experience the standard pattern of your entire programme.

- If your ego cannot cope with promising and competent colleagues you will soon have dwarfs of your size around you.
- If you are prepared to die for the poor and for your colleagues you are true to your calling, but if you allow them to take you for a ride you are a Saint - your place is on a pedestal, you are just now in the wrong position.
- Finally - once in a while check to see if your Executive Director has read/forgotten his note!

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