

[SATURDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2006]

Management sadhus vs Hari Sadus

L. PRAKASH SAI



The creative genius that produced the blockbuster advertisement for an online head-hunting firm captured the imagination of many a lesser mortal in corporate India. Hari Sadu, an irascible executive known for insulting his subordinates, is administered a bitter pill when one of the juniors volunteers to decipher the former's name for the benefit of a caller over phone: "H for Hitler, A for Arrogant, R for Rascal, I for Idiot, S for Shameless...". Much to the chagrin of the boss, the cryptic smile on the lips of the protagonist appears to manifest into a clarion call: "Subordinates of the corporate world unite!"

The act of lampooning bosses evolved into a well-organised industry in the hands of cartoonists such as Scott Adams (creator of Dilbert comic strip). The products of this serious business range from syndicated columns in newspapers and book publications to licensing characters for appearing on retail merchandise and in comedy serials.

The target customers are perhaps the job hoppers who eternally grumble in exit interviews that authoritarian proclivities of their bosses remind them of the Orwellian *Animal farm* or the gory mental asylum depicted in the classic movie *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*.

Henry Mintzberg, in his enlightening book *Managers Not MBAs*, proposed an interesting mathematical formulation: arrogance equals confidence minus competence. He opines that managers with high competence and high confidence are acknowledged leaders in the business world whereas managers with high confidence and low competence are usually trouble-makers.

The China Daily recently ran a feature on Wu Gong, a smart entrepreneur, who established a bar with 20 "models" who are available for receiving a sound beating from customers. Customers can specify how they want the models to dress. Will this brand of 'boss-beating' — illusory or otherwise, emerge as a profitable business model for some and a healthy outlet for stress relief for great many? The jury is still out. Meanwhile, the reliable mantra for corporate subordinates has been prescribed as the very first law in the illuminating book, *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene: "Never outshine thy master."

Researchers, who studied business models and corporate lifecycles, correlated the organisational behavioural patterns with the particular evolutionary stage the business finds itself in — be it infancy, adolescence, prime, aristocracy, bureaucracy or decline. Ichak Adizes, in his classic work on corporate lifecycles, observed: “When an organisation starts to age, the first place the symptoms appear is in the attitudes, outlook and behaviours of its leaders”. He further presented the deeply contrasting traits of growing and ageing companies.

Growing companies keep people for their contributions, despite their personalities whereas ageing companies retain people for their personalities despite their lack of contribution to the organisation. The former sees problems as opportunities whereas the latter views opportunities as problems. In growing firms, everything is permitted unless explicitly forbidden whereas in ageing firms everything is forbidden unless expressly permitted.

Personal success stems from taking risk in growing firms whereas in ageing firms personal success stems from avoiding risk. Authority is generally not matched with responsibility in ageing companies, which inevitably leads to bossism and subordination. To bring about a change in such an organisation’s behaviour, it might be necessary to change structure, processes, systems, rewards and even people.

Jim Collins, in his well-researched book *Good To Great*, introduces a new concept of Level 5 Leadership: “Self-effacing, even shy — these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton or Caesar.” Perhaps, these ‘level 5 leaders’ can be termed ‘Management sadhus’ in Indian parlance.

The other four levels have been identified as: ‘Highly capable individual’, ‘Contributing team member’, ‘Competent manager’, and ‘Effective leader’. While an effective leader catalyses commitment to and vigorous pursuit of clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards, management sadhus channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company.

The distinction between heroic and engaging management styles has been exemplified by Mintzberg. Hari Sadus might subscribe to heroic management philosophy: “To manage is to make decisions and allocate resources — including those human resources. Managing thus means analysing, often calculating, based on facts from reports”. Engaging management belongs to a different school of mind: “To manage is to bring out the positive energy that exists naturally within people. Managing thus means engaging, based on judgement, rooted in context.” Further, in the former style, ‘leadership is thrust upon those who thrust their will on others’ whereas in the latter, ‘leadership is a sacred trust earned from the respect of others’. The words of Charles Kingsley, English novelist, best summarise the life philosophy of management sadhus: “We act as though comfort and luxury were the chief requirements of life, when all that we need to make us happy is something to be enthusiastic about.”

Indian philosophy can offer deeper insights into managerial decision-making, which generally involves exploring a set of solution spaces in a three-dimensional framework comprising objectives, time and causative factors. These solution spaces yield either optimal or sub-optimal results. The ingenuity of management lies in choosing the optimal or ‘satisfying’ solutions that are enduring and most beneficial with a balanced input-output mix.

It is worth mentioning the two phenomena, *sreya* and *preya* described in *Katha Upanishad*, which are solution spaces — the former yielding true well-being, which is long-lasting and bountiful, while the latter leads to pleasant and immediately attractive outcomes, which are ephemeral and trivial. Sankara in his commentary links up the decision-making or choice between *sreya* and *preya* to the understanding or lack of it on the part of the individual.

(The author is a visiting faculty, Department of Management Studies, IIT Madras)