

Chanakya's Business Mantra: Execution Excellence

Yesterday, I had the privilege to conduct a Seminar for my own fraternity ie the Human Resources community. It was a both a matter of pride and some consternation to me, as I was to present "Chanakya's wisdom for HR" to the group. After all, Chanakya is often (mis)understood as a Machiavellian character ie one with cunning, one for whom the end justified seemingly ruthless means, while the fabric of HR is essentially meant to be the opposite of these. However, as the sutras of Chanakya's Arthshastra unfolded in the gathering, they were received with positivity and even excitement.

One of the sutras presented which was met with enthusiastic approval was on "Execution":

"And they should bring about the

- commencement of what's not done,
- the carrying out of what's commenced,
- the improvement of what's carried out, and
- the excellence of execution of orders,

In case of works" (1.15.52)

Let us examine the reason why. I have witnessed a large number of promising initiatives in organizations, which have remained exactly that i.e. initiated but not finished. HR is a witness to many of these, even a champion for several of them. Worse still, many potentially great ideas remained at the drawing table. Furthermore, many organizations known to us are self critical about their "execution capabilities," i.e. the ability of getting things done and feel that only a miracle can make ambitious organizational targets happen. Think why someone like E Sreedharan, credited with the before-time success of Delhi Metro is so valued; think why "excellence in execution" is a prized competency of growing organizations.

Let's examine Chanakya's counsel for Managers in detail:

- **Commencement of what's not done:** is the uncomfortable jump from strategy to action – the first step is to "Begin". The greatest of risks is to not begin. Chanakya's vow of usurping the Nanda dynasty would have been lost in history if he had not acted on it due to the myriad risks associated with it. Not beginning is like writing a script for a great movie... which was never released. Imagine if Martin Luther King's dream was confined only to prose and Kennedy's vision was restricted to mere words.

Life lessons

When we don't begin we fall into the trap of Procrastination

"After all... tomorrow is another day!" is a classic line from Gone with the Wind that exemplifies the perils of 'procrastination'. Scarlett o Hara's character, a glamorized icon is considered by psychologists a leading example of a procrastinator. Procrastination is not a matter of having poor time management skills but rather can be traced to underlying and

more complex psychological reasons. We often give excuses to not to do mundane tasks or we waste time and put needless importance on useless things to avoid doing required tasks.

The impact of procrastination at work can lead to higher stress, greater errors being committed due to last minute pressure, poor reviews, delay in project schedules and extreme dysfunctional issues like negative mental health and social relationships.

It's important to be aware of the reasons for the tendency to procrastinate and give oneself a higher purpose that motivates one to be productive. Reframing perspectives and focusing on goals is critical to overcome procrastination.

To end with a famous Martin Luther King quote that is a beacon for procrastinators "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

- **Carrying out of what's commenced:** having initiated, it is important to take it to its desired conclusion. After all, who does not know the importance of finishers in the game of Cricket, who have often won the game in the last over of the match. Many ambitious projects of the Government are launched and are finally lost in red tape. Perhaps it's also a case of "analysis paralysis" for many organizations.

Lessons for corporate life

Often we observe great ideas emerging and getting lost not due to the lack of passion and ambition or ability for implementation. In corporate terms, a project or initiative is not successful unless there has been an effective 'closure'. Either we get lost in translation due to over thinking a solution or we just lack the gumption it takes to navigate stakeholders, networks, functions etc for the idea to become a reality in the true sense and spirit.

As an example, often seen, organizations set goals annually and form councils, or governance to institutionalize activities that need mobilization of resources. The planning is done with a lot of sound and fury and somewhere over time, the initiative loses steam or direction and one sets new goals the next year. The cycle of failure continues.

To state another oft observed example, surveys and dip sticks have been the trends for a while in organizations to gauge employee engagement but how effectively do we communicate the results or measure the progress through transparent channels of communication? For an employee, the loop is not closed if he/she does not get feedback on the progress made after the voice or opinion was solicited. The engagement intervention ends up creating further disengagement and the survey ends up being a transactional mundane chore to be completed every year. The cycle of failure continues.

- **The improvement of what's carried out:** was met with a loud group response of "KAIZEN!!!" (viz. the popular practice of continuous improvement) by the audience being addressed. There is barely a manufacturing organization that is not living these principles each day, as also professionals in every arena. There is no mastery in any field without years of painstaking practice, and what practice ensures is improvement at every stage – mastery is the outcome of daily improvement. Fast growing organizations always improve endlessly eg. Flipkart and Indigo are examples who are always striving to deliver superior customer experiences.

Lessons for corporate life

Sustainability is key.

A product, service or process needs to be continually monitored with effective reviews, incorporating customer feedback and making continual improvements.

In an age when your product is as creative as the next innovation, the ability to visualize the future and stay focused on improving customer experience or creating new customer experiences is critical for survival. Example of Nokia which was a leader in mobile phones, virtually went extinct with the arrival of Blackberry and is now resurfacing with its opportunistic rescue by Microsoft. The arrival of Blackberry was heralded as the next leap in cellular world and it is today marginalized with 0.5% market share compared to 20% globally in 2009 facing the onslaught of android and other cellular technologies.

When we look inwards into our own organizations our workforces and employee needs are continually changing. We have diverse and multi layered workplaces. We need to be able gauge the pulse and keep enhancing their career experience for them to retain their emotional connect with the organization and its purpose.

Having a desire for continual improvement and a strong pulse of the prevailing and future environments are some of the facets that build sustainability at individual and organizational levels

- **The excellence of execution of orders:** personal records and professional benchmarks are all about the desire for excellence. Glory and success are outcomes of excellence. The Leader may have the vision but it's the Manager who brings about the excellence in execution. The dreams of Tata's Nano or Mahindra's Scorpio or Apple's I Pod were only realized due to high standards in execution. This country and its organizations need to make excellence as a 'non-negotiable'.

Leadership lessons

Having an eye on the big picture: The ability to join the dots and being anchored to the big picture drive a passion for excellence. A manager lacking a vision can severely impact the direction and motivation of the team. More often than not, managers get lost in transactional and functional styles of communication and relationships. Getting the job or task in hand done ends up being the biggest preoccupation. A solution needs to be seen as a whole and in parts for it to drive a passion for excellence.

Building an authentic Brand: When we build organizational or personal brands, we have to identify our core. The authentic narratives or stories that we build to inspire our followers mobilize positive energy and influence. While self motivation for excellence is a personal attribute, but excellence can also be inspired by our collective purpose. Great brands have inspired teams. Visionary leaders inspire innovation and leverage potential by making ordinary folks perform in extraordinary ways.

Reams of management literature have been written on the discipline of "execution" - oft the missing link between strategy and results. Chanakya is considered the mastermind who brought about the defeat of the mighty Greeks, in India – the task was not onerous, but impossible to achieve, without impeccable execution. The great Maratha warrior Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's

life is replete with examples of plans hatched with zero tolerance for errors and then effected to perfection – one example being, his escape from Aurangzeb’s prison in a large fruit basket.

The downfall of organizations becomes imminent when they embark on action very late, not to forget the demise of the legendary company Kodak. Mighty vision and brilliant articulation played a role in catapulting a humble tea seller to the PM of a nation, but what will win him admiration and respect is the commencement of action, its execution, monitoring for quality and its continuous improvement and finally, flawless results!

One may realize that a person with the ability to start well is appreciated, the one who finishes what’s initiated is much respected, the one who combines completion with improvement over last time is honoured but the person who elevates standards to a new level of excellence each time is celebrated... forever!

Thus, the exhilaration of the audience, having learnt Chanakya’s Execution Mantra, can be well appreciated!

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