

An order for "three cups of tea"

BY N.H. ATTHREYA

A colonel of the Indian Army narrated an incident to me several years back. It contains a major lesson for those in charge of human affairs, whether in industry, government, or elsewhere.

The colonel was in charge of a workshop. A civilian employee came to him to complain about another employee. This army officer asked the complainant to sit down and then ordered three cups of tea. The employee wondered for whom he had ordered the third cup; but not for long. The officer telephoned the complainee and invited him to join them.

The tea ceremony over, the officer said to the complainant, "Now tell me your complaint." The latter hesitated, and then repeated his complaint, but without its previous force. He was unemotional and factual. "Really, sir," he said, "it was a misunderstanding. I don't have a serious complaint."

When I showed interest in the incident, the officer pointed out, "This is standard practice in the Indian Army." I very much wish it were also standard practice in business, industry, and life in general. For want of such practice, incalculable, avoidable harm is caused to people and organisations. I have witnessed scores of such cases.

Time and again I have noted that when executives, managers, and supervisors are approached by an individual with a grudge against someone, the person is often allowed to play the unfair game of talking about a fellow employee in the latter's absence. Some managers actually encourage such complaining and opinionating.

When "B" is absent, "A" can exaggerate, distort, or even tell deliberate lies about "B," that go unchallenged. If his or her manager does not take time to check back with the affected person, the result is injustice to "B," who comes to know only of the decision, and even that, not first hand. "B" may suffer silently.

Even if he requests and receives a hearing, the operational reality may be against him. The first communica-

tion sometimes makes such a powerful impact that further explanations are almost futile. The complainant wins; the complainee loses.

Gossip is tempting, because it is often "juicy," and the manager may be tempted to believe the complainant is doing him or her a favour by reporting the details.

In personal life, in professional life, and in official life, damage to personnel could be avoided if managers would adopt the basic discipline of discussing complaints against persons only in their presence.

As with any general rule, there are exceptions. While the recommended practice is desirable in 90 percent of the situations, there are some cases in which you may need to use additional judgment—before you place your order for three cups of tea.

• N.H. Atthreya, Ph.D., is a Bombay-based management educator, author, and consultant, and a charter member of the Rotary Club of Bombay Sion, India. His book, "You and I in Business and in Life," has been published in the U.S.A. by Starsong Publications, P.O. Box 1317, Los Altos, California 94023-1317.

HOW TO GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

- Voice your criticism as soon as possible.
- Make only one complaint at a time.
- Don't repeat a point once you have made it.
- Object only to actions the other person can change.
- Make criticisms in the form of suggestions or questions.
- Avoid sarcasm.
- Avoid words like always and never.
- Don't apologize for your confrontation.
- Don't forget to compliment. Then when you do criticize, people will be more likely to accept it.

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Hickory, North Carolina, U.S.A.



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