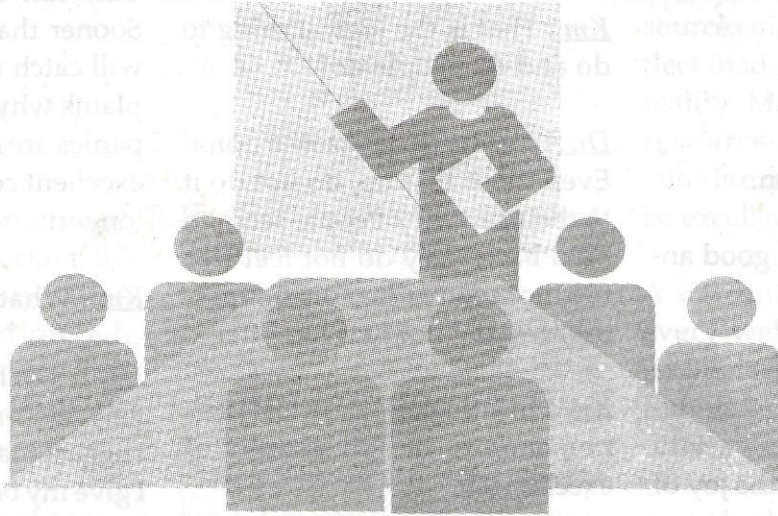


Education in Human Excellence



FOR ENDURING RESULTS

KETNA MEHTA IN AN INTERVIEW WITH N.H. ATTHREYA

In the year 1967, Dr. N. H. Atthreya took the initiative to set up a centre by the name The Indian Centre for Encouraging Excellence. One of the aims is to focus on Excellence as a way of life. More than ten years later, Tom Peters and his associates made the name Excellence popular in corporate circles. Over 500 book titles carry the word Excellence. One such book is by Atthreya - the elder Atthreya from Mumbai, the pioneer in post experience education and the first professional management consultant in India - with the title *Spiritual Culture in the Corporate Drama and the subtitle, To revolutionise Role Excellence in the workplace.* Ketna Mehta interviewed this young - old Guru.

Km : Let us start with some sort

of definition. What is Excellence in general and corporate excellence in particular?

Dr. A : Let us take someone pursuing excellence and observe how (s)he goes about. Firstly, we note that (s)he demonstrates concern and care for others. (In a sustained way)

Secondly, we note that (s)he does whatever (s)he does better and still better. There is visible dynamism in performance and contribution.

Thirdly, we note (s)he does so because of an inner propulsion and not an external compulsion. Not money, not recognition, not one of those external motivational instruments make the person pursue excellence (s)he listens to an inner drummer.

Fourthly, we note that it calls for high stamina to pursue excellence. Women and men of poor stamina - physical, emotional, ethical and others - are not candidates for excellence.

Km : All that you say is as much applicable to corporate life as to personal life?

Dr. A : Without doubt. With only one difference, the difference being the corporation can make it difficult for an individual to pursue it.

Km : If the corporation can make it difficult, it can also do the opposite.

Dr. A : It can, but it often does not.

Km : Some Corporations do.

Dr. A: And they go places.

Km: If some do, others can.

Dr. A: Precisely.

Km: Why don't they?

Dr. A: A good question.

Km: What would be a good answer?

Dr. A: I mentioned the stamina factor. We are capable of stamina. We will bring stamina into play once we concede the joy of excellence.

All can but few choose the workplace as a place of joy. One sure way to have joy at work is to concede the joy of excellence.

Km: Or vice versa?

Dr. A: You are right.

Km: Since we are talking about the corporate world, how can we describe excellence in corporate terms?

Dr. A: We all seem to agree that if we show concern and demonstrate care for the stake holders in general and customers in particular, as a corporation, we will go places.

The proposition becomes simpler in a corporation. It does not say: show concern and care for the whole of humanity but show it for a tiny segment of it, namely, its stake-holders.

One way to do it is to give better

products and services at lesser cost on a consistent and sustained basis.

Km: That is the logical thing to do and do people do?

Dr. A: Many do and some don't. Even those that do, do not do it to their capacity. People seem to hold back. They do not feel free to give. At any rate, this free giving, you do not find too often.

Km: How do you relate this phenomenon to the philosophy of excellence?

Dr. A: Excellence implies appropriate giving and abundant giving. Good work means good giving. You give what you give not because the competitor does it but because your customer deserves it and because you are capable of giving it.

It is not easy though.

Km: What do you say to that?

Dr. A: It is not easy but it is not difficult. It will be difficult if you have to do. It is easy if you choose to do it. It is easy for the votary of excellence because (s)he chooses it.

Km: Don't you think corporations by definition work on the principle - Give the least and get the most?

Dr. A: And that way you make a surplus!

Km: You don't think so? Is that the implication?

Dr. A: That is one way to make a surplus i.e. - it is the *peda-selling-on-the-Tilak-road* mentality way! You can do it for sometime. Sooner than later, the customer will catch up. This probably explains why some excellent companies are not merely no-longer-excellent companies but just no-longer!

Km: What would you suggest!

Dr. A: Why should I suggest? Any well-meaning person will suggest that a wise way is to say: I give my best and you give your best.

Km: My giving the best does not automatically guarantee the other giving the best.

Dr. A: In this world, there are no guarantees. There are only chances. It is common observance that people who give the best do get the best.

Km: You are making pursuit of excellence look simple. How do you get it in an organization?

Dr. A: The essentials are simple. While the understanding is simple, the practice, the consistent practice, the consistent practice on the part of all in an organization is not simple.

Km: How do you assure that?

Dr. A: By some sort of culture building, comprehensive culture building. This means an investment of time and other resources. People take time to learn.

Km : Learn what?

Dr. A : Nothing but the best for me and nothing but the best from me.

Km : Don't you think details are important?

Dr. A : Details ARE important. The spirit is more important. Excellence as a chosen way of life—this education should precede any other training or developmental effort. This is where the Indian heritage comes handy.

Km : You are referring to Indian Ethos?

Dr. A : In a sense, yes.

Km : This is why you wrote the book?

Dr. A : I wrote the book because I felt that economic culture and technological culture can take us so far and no further. Excellence at work becomes possible only when I have spiritual culture. It is this culture that makes caring for you an integral part of my living day.

Km : Don't you think it is hard?

Dr. A : It may be hard for some but it should be easy for us in India because we have a spiritual tradition. The secular pundits may deny this; the anglicised folk may deny this. The substantial part of the working population concedes this almost automatically. Once you remind them, they activate this great strength in them. We have been

seeing this phenomenon in organisation after organisation.

Km : Can it happen overnight?

Dr. A : It can and it cannot.

Km : What is that paradox?

Dr. A : It can because the work force picks the message fast. It cannot because the higher management does not understand this is not a gimmick; and it is all the time looking for a gimmick.

Km : Are you saying organizations do not concede the possibility?

Dr. A : My observation is that corporations do concede the possibility. They do take some efforts. Only they are piecemeal attempts. The attempts do not seem to carry conviction. The needed stamina I find missing.

Km : What would be your one suggestion?

Dr. A : When I make this suggestion, I am not saying anything new. I am only restating what people know. Spiritual culture is a culture. A culture to stabilise, it takes time. Those who are in a hurry and those who go from fad to fad cannot hope to get the benefit of this culture. My suggestion would be : Build man as a physical, emotional, intellectual AND spiritual being, a wholistic being, besides an economic and technical one. Invest in man. So doing is investing in an appreciating asset, an end-

lessly appreciating asset.

Looking at man as one of the resources and talking of human resources management seem to reflect inadequate appreciation of reality. Man is central. He is a resource of resources. When (s)he is excellent, everything can be excellent.

A cardinal responsibility of every well-meaning organization is to let him be excellent. Every little effort made in this direction tells.

Km : You have been active in the management world as a practicing executive, a pioneering consultant and a prolific writer. Is there some specific reason why you do not drop names/mean give names and places?

Dr. A : Your readers probably know more than I do regarding who is doing what here in India and abroad. They can fill in the blanks. While it is tempting to know who does what and then do it, my preference is to start doing what needs to be done and set up a precedent oneself. Excellence is a journey and the sooner we take it consciously and systematically, the surer we will go places.

Km : On a personal note, may I ask a question or two?

Dr. A : Please go ahead.

Km : You have been innovating in a number of areas. what is your current focus?

Dr. A : For some time now, it has been the fine art of learning and learning to learn, learning for holistic wellbeing, learning for Role Excellence. The crucial ability in the coming years for any professional is learn-ability to learn what is needed, what is significant and what is relevant. As for the methodology, I find the retreat method effective.

Km : Another question. You are working long hours even today. I see you doing day long workshops. At 76, where do you get the energy from?

Dr. A : There are two ages—the physiological age and the psychological age. I suppose I am doing my little to control the controllable—the psychological age. One way to keep psychological age young I have found is to study human excellence at work. There is plenty of excellence in our country and this thought itself is invigorating.

Km : One final question. Is age an advantage or disadvantage for a professional consultant?

Dr. A : It is both. There is a say-

ing *bala josya and vriddha vaidya*. For certain consultancies like IT, the young age is an advantage; and for transformation consultancies, the elder age is an advantage.

Km : Thank you for your time. Thank you for your sharing.

(Dr. N.H. Atthreya heads one of the oldest management consultancies, MMC school of management and has written more than 25 books on various aspects of management).

