

POWER OF A MISSED MEAL

“There are various stakeholders in any organization. In our Institute they were faculty members, officers staff members, students, Board members, MHRD representatives. Each one had different expectations and consciously or otherwise created problems, which I found were difficult to handle; Luckily, not all of them came at the same time” said the Director.

“After four years of being in the position of Director, I was feeling happy; the Institute had grown despite various constraints and we were having all the stakeholders happy except some officers, who were demanding elevation to positions that did not exist and MHRD was not prepared to consider creations of higher level position despite request by the Directors of various Institutions.

However, one fine morning we faced a totally unexpected development that shocked us. We had given advertisement for security and house keeping contracts. The agency which had assumed charge for both the services six year ago had agreed for renewal on a nominal increase three years ago, but was reluctant to continue as the staff was agitating for 50% increase in monthly compensation, allegedly at the instance of local political leaders of four main national parties and some insiders. Some office bearer of the institute’s staff union had told me earlier that “they are instigating us to go for agitation”. We therefore floated tenders for the two services” he continued.

The tenders were invited and a committee was constituted to examine the same and make recommendations for award of contracts. The committee finalized and called negotiation two parties, S1 and S2, who had made lowest tender for security and house keeping respectively. Being a small city with total populations of 5 lakhs, the previous agency was had all the workers from neighbouring area. The new agencies also had to bank on them as bringing securities guards and housekeeping staff from outside the city was not possible.

The problem was that both the security as well as house keeping service provide were proposing reduction in number of persons to 2/3 of the existing manpower. The workers allegedly on the instigation of local politicians, belonging to four different national political parties, were demanding a 50% hike in monthly payment (governed under minimum wages Act). The Central Government had issued a circular asking centrally funded institution to reduce expenses by 10% as an economic measure.

While the issue could be amicably settle with the security service provider, who was under supervision of a former army colonel, the same was not getting settled with service provider for house keeping, which did not have a strong supervisor locally. A young person deputed for the purpose was threatened by outside unions for dire consequences (life threats) if he entered the campus. The matter could not settle and for some 15 days workers did not attend to work. The campus started stinking; with not solution in site.

In the meantime due to some terrorist attacks elsewhere, the central government advised not to allow any unauthorized persons in the campus, since the worker had still not been formally engaged by the service provide 2 (S2), the Institute could not issue entry pass to them.

The matter hotted up and one morning there was a frantic call from the officer dealing with the subject, informing the Director that all the house keeping workers had gathered at the main gate and planning to forcibly enter the gate with the support 4 unions leaders, some whom were perceived to be some militant. He also informed that the fury is so much that there could be serious law and order problem and the institute’s property may be damaged. The situation had turned very grave and frightening all of a sudden and situation looked going out of control.

The commander of the S1 was sitting with the Director and suggested that the latter should immediately request of Home Ministry to air lift CISF paratroopers from Delhi to save the “glass” campus. We tried to contact our ministry but that day due to some important function the minister and officers could not be contacted. We then sent a fax to Secretary (Home). The Ministry did not send CISF paratroopers but requested the DGP of the state government to rush help urgently. By afternoon IGP of the area reached campus and assured us full safety, including positioning of police vans fitted with guns, hidden beneath the tall coconut trees and bushes spread throughout the campus. It gave me a sense of security and confidence to face the situation. But that alone was not the solution. The dead lock had to be broken.

The officer-in-charge of the security had been asking the Director to meet the outside union leaders of four major union leaders to negotiate the matter. The Director was reluctant as he had no locus-standi to negotiate on behalf of the S2. He however, was prepared to meet as citizen of the area to develop solution. The next day all the 4 union leaders came to meet.

“We started at 11 am and changed three interpreters as I did not know local, vernacular language and they did not know either English or Hindi, which I knew”. It was difficult to find a solution as the union leaders were not willing to accept signing of individual agreements, which S2 was stipulating as a standard practice of the company. The unions wanted that I should also guarantee that no one would be removed, which I could not agree. Besides, there were two conditions in the contract, one related to removal on indiscipline and another one that some of the surplus staff should be transferred to other establishments of S2 in the city, if necessary. I was not agreeable to any of them, as I had no locus-standi on the issue” said the Director. .

The dead lock continued for 3 hours and at 2 p.m. my office assistant reminded me of the lunch time getting over. I asked him to wait. At 3 p.m. he asked again and arranged lunch in the office. At 4 p.m. the union leaders requested me to have lunch. At 5 pm they asked again. I enquired whether they had taken. They replied in affirmative. At 5.30 they requested again. I was upset. “The 40 odd workers who had served the Institute for 6 years have not taken lunch, and you all who pretend to represent them have taken lunch. How can I swallow the meal? I will not be able to do it” the Director said.

At 6 p.m. all 4 leaders relented and said “We are agreeing to everything. We trust you, but would like to make one request. Please meet the workers and tell them that they won’t be sacked now for reduction of manpower as proposed by S2. They all will sign individual agreements also. The demand for 50% hike in compensation will also not be impressed. They all have faith in you. Please do not tell any administrative staff. And please take lunch”. I agreed to meet the workers but made it clear that I will only request the service provider not to do so” said the Director.

Next day morning 8’ am (before office opened at 9 pm), all the people assembled at top floor of the new dining hall on the near side of the institute. Each one signed the agreement collected security pass, had a cup of tea, and resumed duty at 9 pm when the institute offices opened.

“I had never realised the power of missing a meal as a substitute for bullets and guns? But could now imagine the power Gandhiji’s “Annashan” commanded that contributed to independence of India” he concluded..

Q. How far and under what circumstances it can still work in Indian organizations?