

"We are trying our best to create a climate of complete freedom and openness, where people can grow uninhibited by pressure of delegated authority and by sheer merit and ability... where every individual has the fullest opportunity and freedom to assume responsibilities on the one hand and to take the pressure of work on the other hand to whatever extent he may like. [\[1\]](#) "

Late Agha Hasan Abedi

Much has been written on BCCI (Bank of Credit and Commerce International) and several paperbacks on its rise and fall found their way to the bookstores in the early nineties. What were the reasons for the closure of BCCI? This remains a big question and to answer it is beyond the scope of this article. However, I must add that much of what has been published portrays a biased picture of events that lead to its closure.

BCCI was one of the fastest growing in the world. It became a source of envy worldwide in the international banking community and within a few years was surrounded by controversy. In 1987 it fell victim to money laundering allegations of epic global proportions and was shut down in July 1991 by the Bank of England following pressure from the Federal Reserve of the US.

Legends live in memories of people inspired by their achievements. They never die. No one in the recent history of our subcontinent has ever accomplished global impact of the magnitude a man did in less than twenty years (1972 to 1991). This man exhibited leadership beyond borders. He built an organization from scratch in 1972 that grew to being the seventh largest and fastest growing private bank in the world. At its height, the bank had an active presence in 72 countries with assets exceeding US \$ 50 billion (direct and indirect) by 1990. It had over fourteen thousand employees comprising 98 nationalities. Here was a borderless corporation spanning the world with a corporate culture, mission and purpose that transcended the ordinary and the conventional paradigm.

Who has ever achieved such feat in our corporate history? One name that comes to mind is late Agha Hasan Abedi, a man with a mega dream, who traveled the world, and networked with prominent figures and heads of states from the east and west, and the north and south. He was given state receptions in countries like China. Amongst his close friends and associates were prominent personalities like President Jimmy Carter, late Clark Clifford, legal counsel to four previous presidents of the United States of America; Sir James Callaghan, the then prime minister of Great Britain, late Indira Gandhi and the like.

Mr. Abedi was an exemplary leader with a borderless mind. The expanse and beauty of his vision and his philosophy of business management were pioneering and far ahead of his time. Values are the soul of organizational culture, and leaders personify them. They are pivotal figures in a strong culture. He was a human being with immense strengths and dare I say, weaknesses. In an interview that Mr Abedi gave to Financial Times of London back in 1978, he was asked to share his biggest strength and his significant weakness. His answer was simple. He said “people” to both. History records this to be true. It is vital to strike a balance when trusting and forgiving people. Trust should never be blind. It also needs watchfulness. In my view, it is partly this imbalance that led to the undoing of BCCI.

Mr. Abedi was born in Lucknow (India), in a family of noble descent. After taking a masters degree in English Literature and graduating in Law, he began his banking career in Bombay with Habib Bank. The partition of the Indian Sub-Continent in 1947 brought about dramatic changes in its banking system. It created a near vacuum of banking services in the area, which became Pakistan. Habib Bank Limited moved its Head Office to Pakistan in order to fill this vacuum and became virtually the unchallenged leading bank of that country.

Seeing a unique opportunity to fulfill his inborn urge to grow and succeed, Mr Abedi made an important contribution in the growth of the newly established bank. By 1958, he felt that the economic development of the new nation of Pakistan called for greater competition and innovation in its banking system. Therefore in 1958, he founded a new bank – United Bank Limited.

In addition to the considerable banking experience he is said to have acquired, he had also developed new approaches to management and business development, which stressed individual development and autonomy. Sadly, this is still not a reality in most organizations. Business development became a primary objective of management. Within ten years of its foundation, the United Bank had become the second largest bank in Pakistan and when banks were nationalized in Pakistan in 1973; it was almost as large as the largest bank in that country in terms of assets.

In a talk recently given by Peter Senge in Dubai, he shared his definition of learning as “a process that enhances our capacity to help us achieve our dreams.” Dr Senge is a faculty member of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, director of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT’s Sloan School of Management and founding partner of the management consulting and training firm Innovation Associates, Inc. His insights into how organizations learn

and share knowledge have helped many leading enterprises around the world to tap into a new and very real source of competitive advantage. Most of what Dr Senge has been saying for almost two decades, Mr Abedi has lived for over forty years.

Mr. Abedi was the first banker in Pakistan to realize the potential of people and markets, particularly overseas. As a consequence, United Bank successfully established itself in several Middle Eastern countries and the United Kingdom. At the beginning of the 1970's he began to feel, in the restrictive exchange control climate of the home country (Pakistan), that it would be very difficult to sustain the expansion of UBL's foreign operations. Also with the emergence of the new socio-political trends in the country, nationalization of the banking sector appeared imminent. It was with this background that he is thought to have conceived the idea of the establishment of an international bank in a country, which offered facilities for growth and expansion.

The dramatic success of BCCI lay in the leadership and philosophy of its founder president. Mr Abedi's beliefs and insights may be summarized as follows:

- A sense of timing, a sense of history, a sense of what the future holds.
- A profound interest in human nature and the purpose of life.
- A realization of the power of the human potential and discovery of a key factor that enables the individuals to translate this potential into tangible results and achievements.
- An extraordinary ability to relate to others and to the communities which they compose: to forge them into a powerful force by linking them in pursuit of uncommon common values, beyond their narrow interests, to an end more universal and purposeful.
- An ability to communicate through the articulation of feelings, thereby attracting people of extraordinary commitment.

- An inherently persistent urge for growth and success, as a continuous phenomenon: a law of nature.

Mr Abedi emphasized that “The character of this institution is the result of a process of evolution in a situation of which the entire staff and such other conditions, as economic, social, political etc., are the components. These components are neither created nor controlled by one person and they are constantly changing. As you know the abilities of all of us are also constantly changing. And for this reason we have been taking pains to avoid the establishment of authority and superiority of one staff over the other, except just to the extent that is necessary for keeping an order in the working”. He went on to say: “We are trying our best to create a climate of complete freedom and openness, where people can grow uninhibited by pressure of delegated authority and by sheer merit and ability... where every individual has the fullest opportunity and freedom to assume responsibilities on the one hand and to take the pressure of work on the other hand to whatever extent he may like. In this concept of management, there are two central points, namely, that each individual in the institution moves around objectives rather than dance to the tune of authority, and that a unity is obtained in freedom, as against a unity through authority...unity of thought, purpose and action.” Mr. Abedi said this in an interview he gave in 1966, while still President of the United Bank Limited (published in BCCI’s in-house journal “International” January 1985).

The importance of managing the culture of an organization was not lost on Mr Abedi. In his inaugural address at the 1984 convention of the Management Association of Pakistan (MAP), he said: “the culture determines how things get done in a business. Managing this culture is the principal task of the chief executive officer (also senior and middle management). The culture in turn then manages the people ...it is the vitality of the organization. Its collective energies determine the quality and quantity of our Company’s performance. As custodians and keepers of this spirit, we are the ones who nurture its growth through leadership and vision. Without this vision the energies will wane and collapse in misdirected efforts and random activities”.

We dare to dream only when we have faith in ourselves and in our future. Look around you, meet people working with you, interact with friends and ask yourself how many people do you come across in your family, in your circle of friends and colleagues and community who are beacons of hope and vision? If the number is more than five, you must be in great company.

It is with dreams without borders or barriers that our learning truly starts. What are your dreams? I have met many ‘pragmatic’ and ‘expedient’ directors, general managers and CEOs in Pakistan, but few who also love to dream and inspire others through their compelling vision of the future.

Our aspirations trigger curiosity and compel us to learn in order to build our capacity to create what we truly believe is important to us.

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