

Up or out

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“Every plan has a period of development and if man has power over his impulse by retaining the thought silently in mind, he allows the plan to develop and to take all necessary changes that it may take for its culmination. But when the impulse expresses the thought, it – so to speak – puts out the flame, thus hindering the development of the plan. The wise speak with their mind many times before they speak to anybody.”

Dr H J Witteveen quoting Hazrat Inayat Khan

Our world is rapidly getting very competitive where only the ‘fit’ will survive. This oft repeated notion is driving many managers and CEOs to high levels of stress caused by fear. There is increasing uncertainty in the corporate world. A common consequence of heightened insecurity is

mindless frenzy. This entails economic and social costs. Bad decisions, strategic or tactical, made in haste, are a case in point.

A quick review of history may help us gain valuable insights. From the beginnings of creation to the present day, we see stories replete with examples of survival of the fittest. The word ‘fit’ is deceptively simple yet has pervasive significance for us all. The random House College Dictionary describes ‘fit’ as: proper or becoming; adapted or suited; qualified or competent; worthy or deserving; prepared or ready; in good physical condition or health; of the right size or shape – all keys to survival and possibly endurance.

Why then, the hostility in some quarters, to the ‘up or out’ management philosophy, particularly in the underdeveloped and developing economies? This philosophy holds that the fit stay while the unfit, try to improve, or go. One factor that explains antagonism to such a thought is the lack of social safety nets in our society for those who are rendered jobless because of ‘right-sizing’. Lack of employment opportunities for the unemployed is yet another powerful argument put forward by the ‘unfit’ in favor of making existing corporations fatter and slower, instead of leaner and more responsive to customer needs.

We are trapped in a vicious cycle which insists on hiring people regardless of

merit. It is held that at least this way we will have fewer disgruntled job seekers on the streets! Therefore, our public sector corporations and government departments are grossly mismanaged and inefficient.

Wouldn't having healthier and fitter organizations stimulate a nation's economy, increase employment opportunities, attract investment – local and foreign, and provide greater revenue to the exchequer? This is a virtuous spiral driven by the 'fit', in which everyone wins and there can be prosperity for many, if not all.

The fastest is not necessarily the best and the strongest is not the only basis for endurance as strength can easily be squandered. Something must be said for our innate ability to act appropriately in a variety of situations. Our ability to adapt, change and transform is what makes us fit.

Fitness applies to individuals, organizations and nations. In a company, it's the leadership team that needs to be responsible for preparing its people to deal with the changing market dynamics – locally and internationally. Building responsiveness, flexibility and agility in the business is their key role. A company's fitness could come from getting the best out of people, through capacity building initiatives coupled with adherence to principles of good corporate governance. In addition, business improvement interventions such as reengineering, bottom-up

improvement programs like Kaizen, Six Sigma and other tools could be used for greater corporate fitness.

"Up or Out" thinking is often seen as heartless and cruel. But is it? Every discipline in life, whether worldly or spiritual, has a clear sense of what is fit. The quote from Hazrat Inayat Khan points to what is needed in managers in most situations. Patience, reflection, contemplation, discernment, analysis and timing are essential ingredients that contribute to fitness of any professional. Only fit managers can contribute to aligning business processes to the overall company strategy.

Setting new standards of performance and quality is therefore the essence of every professional's mandate. Commitment to excellence is just that. Every vocation has a benchmark. Fitness means continuously searching for better ways of doing the same and different things by constantly pushing the limits.

What does fitness mean to you as a manager? Conduct an honest self-appraisal now, by asking some or all of the following questions:

1. Am I prepared and ready for what I need to do today, next week, next year and in the coming decades? This can only be determined if I know where I am headed; if my goals are clear, for the immediate, medium and the long term. It is one thing to wish for things to happen. It is

quite another ball game to make them happen! Can wishing alone qualify me as being fit?

2. Am I worthy and deserving of what I am getting and hope to achieve? This largely depends on my self concept. How I see myself. Many think they are mere cogs in a big wheel. While others think no end of themselves i.e., they view themselves as gifts from God to mankind. Both views are extreme and quite counterproductive. This begs a moment for reflection. Is your potential infinite? Is what you do contributing to the big picture?
3. Am I adapted or suited to my environment? Am I flexible enough to adjust my behavior to different people and situations? Am I like water in a stream that flows freely around obstacles and meets with the ocean? Am I open to learning and new ideas? Do I display empathy – being able to see and feel the pain or joy of another?

Mediocrity as a way of managing is an admission to being unfit. Comfort with status quo is also a sure sign of being unfit. Are you aiming to turn your organization into a more competitive, collaborative and admired player in your industry? Are you relentlessly pursuing higher goals?

From well over two decades ago, Arif Ijaz, then CEO of KSB Pumps (a German multinational) is an inspiring example of fitness. Arif turned around its Pakistan operations in 1999/2000 in less than two years with the same people he inherited. He implemented top-down change through re-engineering where he obtained commitment from his managers. He simultaneously initiated Kaizen for bottom-up improvements by involving all the workers. Whether in the company's head office in Lahore, or in its plant in Hasanabdal, the word 'DEADLINE' was visible in all the corridors and offices. Metrics were displayed everywhere. Execution, accountability and celebration of successes drove the company's performance.

I remember asking Arif how it felt to be a CEO of a successful company in Pakistan. He replied with a smile, saying, "Jack Welch is a CEO too! There is still a very long way for me to go!"

Simple to understand is not easy to execute. Fitness will remain the key to our survival and prosperity. The choice will always be ours – whether we go up or out!

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