

How do we inspire others to give their best?

“Who has inspired the best in you?” I have asked this question to hundreds of executives and senior managers. The answers vary, with some people going back to their early life in school and in college; others talk about colleagues in the workplace.

My own favourite personal story is of Kamla Devi. The story goes like this. As a child I grew up studying in schools using CBSE syllabus where Hindi was a compulsory subject. Coming, as I did, from the North East of the country, Hindi was not my strength. For one, I had immense difficulty in figuring out the gender of each and everything based on which how the sentence is constructed is determined. Needless to say, I got marks in 30s and 40s range till Class 9. My Class teacher in Class 9 would look at my report card, see my marks in Hindi, and nod understandingly and say, “ You have a language problem.” She understood my limitation.

Then came Kamla Devi, our new Hindi teacher in class 10. In our very first Hindi Class she gave us a composition and on receipt of our papers announced, “I would like to read out what Prasenjit has written.” I was prepared. Till then my teachers referred to my work in Hindi only as examples of how not to write Hindi. I was in for a surprise. Instead of the usual criticisms, I found Kamala Devi reading out a passage from my composition and praising me for my innovative thinking in that passage!

Throughout that year Kamla Devi would catch something right in my Hindi. She would call me and say, ”Prasenjit what you have written in this passage reminds me of Harivansh Rai Bachchan’s *Madhushala*. Have you read it?” There was no question of reading anything not in the syllabus, particularly in Hindi! But by the end of the year my father was getting tired searching for books in the lanes opposite Old Delhi Railway Station, books being read by BA students in Hindi!

In Class 10 Board Examination I got 73 per cent in Hindi. I would have got higher marks in other subjects. But 73 per cent in Hindi was a turning point in my life. I realized, if I can get 73 per cent in Hindi, I could just about do anything I put my mind to!

I forgot about Kamala Devi till some years back I started analyzing my own failure as a manager in getting one of my team members to perform well. “When was I inspired to give my best?” I asked myself. And I thought about Kamla Devi.

In my workshops with executives & senior managers of various Organisations I ask them to describe the attributes or characteristics of the people who have inspired the best in them. Some of the characteristics that emerge are:

1. They believe in your potential

The above is true in most cases, inspite of the fact that there is often no past track record to justify this belief. A lot of people give examples of how they were inspired by the faith showed on them, and how they stretched to live up to that faith. This also reinforces the power of high expectations.

2. They were able to build trust in the relationship:

Even when they did something which did not make sense to you at that point of time e.g. being transferred to a less desirable location, you were convinced that they had your best interest in their heart. In most cases they genuinely cared for you.

3. They role modeled the behaviour they wanted you to exhibit:

In most cases, the people who inspired the best in you were not asking you to do something which they themselves are not prepared to do or demonstrate. Therefore, there was credibility in what they were saying. When I commented on the good handwriting of one person in a workshop, he shared how his father would not accept any work done by him with poor handwriting. Needless to say his father himself had immaculate handwriting.

4. Sometimes they challenged you

In a large group there are always examples of someone being challenged and confronted in a manner which provokes them to give their best. However, even in these cases there was, in most cases, an underlying level of trust which enabled the confrontation to be effective. For example, one person who kept on frequently changing jobs was asked by his friend, “How long will you keep running away?” This was a turning point in his life, and his behaviour changed dramatically after that.

What came out repeatedly was that the people who inspired the best in you does not necessarily spend enormous amount of time. In fact, they seldom spend too much time teaching or training you. You do the hard work. I realized as I look back at Kamla Devi that she never *taught* me Hindi. Yet, she did something which enabled me to move from 40s to 73 per cent in Hindi, over a course of one year.

John Whitmore, in his book *Coaching for Performance*, identifies the essence of good coaching as building Awareness and enabling the person being coached to take Responsibility for change.

This is exactly what Kamla Devi and countless other examples of people who inspire us to give our best do. This is what we do when we inspire others to give their best.

Behavioural Coaching institute in US in their research in Fortune 1000 companies concluded that among the benefits to companies that provided coaching to executives were improvements in:

- Productivity (reported by 53% of executives)
- Quality (48%)
- Organizational strength (48%)
- Customer service (39%)
- Reducing customer complaints (34%)
- Retaining executives who received coaching (32%)
- Cost reductions (23%) and
- Bottom-line profitability (22%)

There are numerous studies on benefits of coaching:

- 71% of Fortune 500 companies use coaching to make learning occur in their organizations...(ASTD, 2004)
- 75% executives said coaching played a key role in their career(ASTD, 1998)
- Survey of CEO's states that one of the top three factors in their career was coaching..(Account Temps survey, 2003)
- 96% executives said that mentoring is an important developmental tool.....(Account Temps survey, 2002)
- Improved retention by 20-30%(ASTD, 2005)
- On 11 job essential skills, coachees increased skills by an average of 61% through successful coaching(MMHA, 2000)

Does this mean coaching as a practice has now become widespread in Organisations? Before we go into statistics let's ask ourselves the following question.

When was the last time we were able to inspire someone to give his or her best, the way we were inspired by someone else? So what comes in the way of our being an effective coach?

Two of the biggest barriers that I have faced in being an effective coach are:

1. Mental blocks arising out of my past experience/ observations:

Unlike external coaches, as a manager I already have an opinion about my team members. To the extent this opinion reinforces the team member's potential to improve I am effective. However, the opposite is often true. If I have made up my mind about a team member (" He always gives excuses and does not take accountability.") I will only

see examples of behaviour to reinforce my judgement about the team member. This is the reason why average performers in one department sometimes can become high performers in another department.

2. My ego:

What if the person I am supposed to coach becomes more effective than I am. Most Organisations reward and recognize Rainmakers, Leaders and Technical Specialists. Very few reward Star makers (Developers of people). Some time back, a person I had coached wrote me a long letter about how she was demotivated because she felt the Organisation has overlooked her case for promotion. While I recognized the issue, I was hurt by the fact that she choose to write an official letter rather than come and talk. Instead of looking at it as my failure to build enough trust in the relationship, or ask her why she wrote a letter (Maybe, she thinks clearly when she writes), I took it as a personal insult. “ Now that the matter is official, let HR handle it,” I thought. Much later I realized that it was not her action, but my ego which stopped me from using that situation as an opportunity for a coaching dialogue.

The role of ego hit me when I received a reference check from an US university. Tamanna, one of my star team members was seeking admission to this university and gave my name as a reference. After giving glowing reference with examples in the form, I was stuck by the last question in the form. The question was, “ Given an opportunity would you like to work for this person?” I am proud to say that my answer was an unequivocal “Yes!”

In my next column I will talk about how to be an effective coach and what Organisations like Intel, Sapient, Fedex, Godrej etc are doing to encourage a coaching culture

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