

## The Runaway Syndrome

It has often been heard and seen that employees do not leave organizations but leave managers and loyalty attributions run on the same lines. No matter how much professionalism has matured and outlooks changed, but it is an amazing thing, how everything boils down to those hours of incumbency and professional interactions. My experience while addressing attrition, was unique in itself but more importantly, some facts stared me in the face, which I realized were low hanging fruits but were never plucked. A thought out strategy to counter the adversities of incumbency have been contemplated by many a professional but all such thought processes succumb to the ultimate cycle of routines, deliverables and growth. I would like to outline three specific hierarchies, the first level executives, the middle managers and the senior management to share my experiences and my respective models for addressing the same. The models describe typical environments in organizations of various sizes, small, medium and large multinational corporations. The accounts may be in first person by that is because I wish to describe things as they are and also how a person may handle the

challenges that are typical of a tenure of incumbency.

It is the primitive zone of management, as I would like to call it but one of the best schools I must say. A typical scenario in a small enterprise comprising of 10 - 15 odd employees could be described as an office divided by barriers of hierarchy, tenure and favouritism. Attrition was high with promising candidates but the ones laden with the pressures of survival would associate themselves conveniently with one of the so called lobbies. These lobbies were really interesting. All of them seem to act against each other but came from the same root. Little did the poor employees understand, that, these were the tactics of a typical proprietor laden with the desire to operate only for earning money but without any corporate or vision of an enterprise or bigger picture as such. The only aspiration was increasing earnings while fixating on the operating costs. In this scenario, the only way to get the job done was either intimidating employees to work or quit or show the silver lining of a possible future while dividing them within lobbies to ensure they would never have the opportunity to

think together. The risk of the employees understanding the reality might be the primary reason for such an approach. Again owing allegiance to a particular senior might lead to the promised haven and help in growth. Here growth was a funny concept. In practicality, there were none because the organization was never growing but the owner was just becoming rich. If only a senior would leave, which again was a distant possibility, the option to step in those shoes would arise. So business went on as usual with these bubbles of promises and perhaps a lucky increment somewhere in store. These organizations were the best places to learn. An executive who could intelligently operate and liaison with the environment had the entire business to understand. Before I discuss the model, let me mention here that, it was the outcome of trials and errors before finally hitting the right strategy of surviving while working in such an organization in the early parts of my career. I had few choices and the last one was quitting. Being of the basic nature of being happy while inspired, I found my own way of redemption during my 3 years of association with this company. I use the word model because, today after 26 years when I sit back and think, I

realize that, my way of dealing with my job then, was perhaps something that will help many starters, who live with the same set of choices that I had then.

The first day on my job didn't seem anything spectacular except for the fact that this was my first step into the world of earning. Earning as in, that, from a proper job. I did my odd errands with privately teaching students but then that was just to survive. This job was important and definitely something that I was not letting go off easily. After waiting at the reception, I was called and introduced to the immediate boss. The work was not yet defined and I was asked to tag along with him. Exciting as it was, but the fact that spending 4 days into the job and not anything particularly meaningful or anything specifically assigned was not doing any wonders to my feeling of being worthy. Nevertheless I tagged along with my boss who seemed to be one of the "know it all" individuals in the company who I also learned by now had a seemingly strong lineage with the owner. Seemed a win-win situation but that too premature to come to any conclusions. So it turned out to be, although that was contrary to my assumptions. Soon I was transferred to a young man who became my new boss

and within hours of my transfer, I was given a long list of tasks that were my responsibilities. A week in to the job and I realized that I was demoted, at least as far as my reporting boss was concerned. At that point of time, the need for the job overtook my frustration and I put my head down to get started. My boss seem to find everything but anything right in my deliveries but I kept my calm and carried on. As an automatic reaction, I was getting distracted and discouraged and no sooner than later, during the regular lunch time conferences that we employees had and perhaps the only period where we interacted with each other, I learned that I was working in place of someone, who my boss had recommended but wasn't selected. This was like a final nail in the coffin as I realized that I was up against a storm which was more than what my ship could handle. A couple of weeks passed by and things hadn't changed a bit for the better. Let me mention here that these couple of weeks saw multiple instances where my boss directly expressed that I'd rather quit because I wasn't doing anything I was being paid for. One day I decided that I had enough and figured that I needed to have a straight conversation with my boss. I asked his permission to

Speak with him and I was called upon. I directly asked him, what he thought my problem was and how I could change anything, to be worthy of the organization. After a pause, the first time I saw my boss smiling. For me, it was the final gesture of my departure. Let me mention here, in my complete bewilderment I had not failed to mention, that I was going to keep this job, no matter what and perhaps that made my boss realize that he himself was up against an equally big wall which he could not move. At least so was my perception or perhaps wishful thinking. Anyways the conversation ended with a feeble light at the end of the tunnel where perhaps my boss had realized that things required to change. Surprisingly enough, I was called upon by my first boss to his cabin. I must mention here that, the conversation that I was having with my current boss was in the open workspace which had many other employees sitting closely. Apart from the owner and the three know it all individuals which included my first boss, rest would sit in a single enclave for the daily duties. The conversation with my first boss started with his direct question, whether I was facing any issues working in this company. My reply was equally straight citing that nothing except that I

didn't seem to do anything right according to my current boss and I really wanted to be of worth to this company. There were some files on his table, which he was referring to and I could gather those pertained to my work, and he exclaimed that I wasn't doing that bad. Next day, I found myself with my old boss and finally was handling some meaningful work. The next 12-15 months I kept my head down and got under the skin of affairs till I was commanding a position of a knowledgeable employee in that company. Let me not forget to mention, that I was called upon by the owner a couple of times to offer explanations to certain aspects of the matters that I handled and the interactions went pretty well. My three years with that company ended with a senior tag and one increment but what I stepped out with was a huge amount of knowledge at least in the domain I was working in.

My next stop was a medium size public limited company. Before embarking on the journey of my career further, I just wanted to outline the few things that helped me keep my job in my first company for three years. First, I kept my head down, second, I spoke up when I needed to and with the impression that I wanted to be of worth to the company

and third, I didn't allow things like, was my job doing me justice or was I being paid enough or what others in the company were up to, to bog my mind or distract me. My advice to all starters would be to follow these rules on their first job. This is the phase of learning, getting acclimatized to the concept of doing a job and also maturing with every passing day with the knowledge of personnel management. Quitting is the easiest solution but then a rolling stone gathers no moss.

After three years, it quite occurred to me that along with knowledge, there also needs to be growth since application of knowledge and gaining more knowledge is imperative for any professional. In those days, portals were not yet in use and newspapers would be the main medium for searching jobs. In response to one such advertisement, I replied and received a response giving a date for an interview. The interview went off well and the job was offered. The salary was definitely more than what I was earning currently, but more importantly, the company was bigger. With an employee count, both onsite and offsite combined, of 230 it was a limited company on the verge of going for a public issue. I would call it a medium size enterprise. I communicated my intention to

resign and was naturally made offers of a pay hike but no change in designation. I firmly stood ground extremely courteously and was granted release after a fortnight of handover formalities. My joining was a month later so I had a fortnight more to relax and gather myself for my new job. On my first day, things were different. I had an assigned desk and was immediately given the task to take handover of quite an important job. Not that I was aware of what needed to be done, but I was allowed three days to sit with the person handling it till now to understand anything and everything about it. I grasped as much as I could from my unwilling mentor and got started. Little did I realize that I had a completely wrong idea about the work and to add to my woes, when I would go to get the prepared documents signed by a superior officer, he would sign it off without realizing that it was wrong (later it came to light that he had no idea what the right way was). On one particular instance while discussing with our banker, it came to light that the error in calculation had cost our company a good amount of money. The good news was, it was rectifiable and thankfully the kind officer at the bank, explained to me in details, how the same needed to be done. Armed with

the correct knowledge, I came back to office and shared the details with my immediate boss. He played a smart one by saying I should have discussed with him earlier, conveniently forgetting that he had specifically instructed me not to bother him with any other work as he was busy with the public issue. Now as per the rules of the company, a senior director would come to inspect the state of affairs every fortnight along with the company's chartered accountant and I had the scope to share everything. Now I need to say here that I was called as he wanted to see who the new Assistant Manager was (that was the designation, I had joined with). On asking what my deliverables were, my senior explained the details and immediately the senior director asked me about the documentations in question. I very honestly explained my errors and then my meeting with the bank and the subsequent remedial action. The question that arose was, as I was new (was just in for a month), why were these not checked by the superior officer, who had signed the documents. The castle of cards started falling and I was in a very awkward position by being seemingly right and my superiors taking the brunt. The worst thing to promote

hostility against me in my new job. This time I knew, it was a matter of time before I had to quit. I was up against a senior officer of the company. It was decided that I would directly get the documents signed by the chartered accountant post rectification and that shall be the practice henceforth. That day after everyone left, I was called in by the senior officer. I knew, that it was time to say good bye and start searching for a new job. I entered his cabin and found pacing up and down. He asked me with a lot of agitation, why I didn't mention the mistakes to him and why I directly speak to the senior director. Before, I could explain that it was just a day ago that everything came to light while I had a meeting with our banker and my conversation with my immediate senior. My immediate senior was called and he too faced the flak. Now both of them turned to me to corner me when I realized that it was over and now I needed to stand up because I was not wrong. I very strictly but courteously explained that I was not supposed to know these matters and that I was given all knowledge and information by the person who handled the job before me. It was my endeavour that at least the bank was willing to accept a correction and the loss

of money would be made good. I went on further to explain that perhaps, my taking up the job had saved the company money and there was no reason that I should be cornered. As far as the senior director was concerned, I answered questions that were asked to me and I was bound to and different implications that it had, was not my fault. Little did I realize that I was telling both my seniors very bluntly but not directly that "if you don't know your job, that is not my problem, but I know mine". The meeting ended with a strict instruction to me that all my work should be verified by my immediate senior before being forwarded for any official use. I agreed happily because that was normal and that is what should have been. Life wasn't pleasant but thanks to my diligence, I wasn't faring bad. I did my part diligently and appreciably in the public issue thereby gaining immense knowledge and life went on as usual. Late hours at work were regular, as business was increasing and I hadn't any hands to help me.

Suddenly post the public issue, the company declared its expansion plan. I was part of the meeting to discuss the modalities of the expansion and post the meeting, I went to talk to the superior officer to discuss the expansion. Let me

mention here that things were normal by now, at least so it seemed to me. I was way down the hierarchy and hence it was imperative for me to be respectful and at the same time deliver correctly. After discussing some key points, I asked him whether I have a chance to serve in the expansion plan, which meant an elevation of designation for me. To my most unpleasant surprise, he snapped back, saying I should be happy doing documentation and report to senior directors in the company. Well nothing had changed. I diligently carried on with my work and the expansion plan starting taking shape. Lot of new recruits had joined and the company was on the verge of developing new markets.

In the past year of my incumbency, I have come to learn that there was a workers union operating in the company and I got the first taste of it during the festival seasons when the bonuses were declared. The managerial staff that included me as well, were paid on time but our senior officer had delayed the payments of the regular staffs. The agitation had started and the entire managerial workforce were confined till a decision was made. The senior officer was surrounded by the members of the union and he was even barred from going to

the washroom. After an agitation of over an hour, finally the disbursements were promised the next day. This was a completely new experience for me and I was quite shocked. Once everyone had left, I immediately rushed to my senior officer's cabin to check on him and found him looking completely shattered. Without asking him, I picked up his phone and I asked the pantry to send a cup of coffee and a glass of chilled water. There were no reactions from him as he still looked absolutely shaken. While sipping on the coffee, my immediate boss also came into the room inquiring about him. Perhaps my immediate gesture was too human to hold any grudge the three of us had a long conversation in general just to ease the mind of the situation. Next day I was called by the senior officer and has asked me to sit down. He started by saying that if I had been part of the expansion plan, then I would have been posted to one of the suburban outlets or branches and that my scope wouldn't have increased as much as it would if I am in the head office. I replied to his statement saying that, being my senior, he knew what was best for me, and I would follow his guidance. That set the road for a long association with that company which included a

promotion and two increments. News had reached my ears, that another company was hiring for marketing personnel and due to the nature of the job, the scope was good and the salary great. I naturally applied and got through and then started my career in a new field with a new designation and a new salary.

I wish to highlight here that in the last company, there were every single situation that would make me quit my job but my quick thinking of keeping professional relations and personal relations separate gave me the winning edge. On that particular day, I could have sat at my seat grinning to myself, happy about what happened to the senior officer, but my own dignity and the fact that I wouldn't depreciate myself as a human being, made me act in a manner that restored respect for me. Perhaps, that senior officer was sitting and feeling embarrassed thinking how I might be celebrating his insult but then my human action, my respect for the chair and my balanced professionalism not only helped normalize relationships but also I converted him into my mentor. I suggest that every young professional, should never forget that no matter what he receives in behaviour, that cannot change the better human being in him and

secondly, the chair needs to be respected always and thirdly, balance in action will always help resolving situations and this will pave way for the maturity to come in which will help in their future positions as senior managers and leaders. Again quitting is the easiest option, but a rolling stone gathers no moss.

A huge company with multiple offices and a workforce of over 700 employees together, was to be my next stop and naturally so. Now was the time after 7 long years of working, I needed to understand, what it feels to directly impact revenue. This was a completely different ball game. Pressures were extremely high, tempers were erratic and deliverables were imperative and the only way out was quitting. Now here was a situation, where the company could quit on you and now with the first couple of months the elevated position and pay seemed meaningless. It took more than it gave. Another six months into delivering and closing on targets, I decided, this has to end or I would end up in a hospital with hypertension and high blood pressure. Quitting never being my natural option, I sat to figure out what I was missing. It was difficult because the speed was tremendous and it would force one to fall into the

lines of the general strategies of delivering and leave no room for innovation. Being well within my entitlements, I requested for a week's leave. I timed it suitably to the company so getting it sanctioned was not tough. This was my opportunity to bell the cat, find the optimum strategy, to get ahead in the race. I spent 5 days, literally eating and sleeping most of the time, thus realizing the serious demands of my human system. Finally a couple of days to go, I sat down to strategize. My mind seemed blank and I was just unable to think anything. I generally sat on the PC and suddenly it occurred to me, why not read some stuff of the gurus of marketing. I spent the next few hours reading material and watching a few videos. A completely new world opened in front of me. Quickly I jotted down points that were relevant to my work and sat down to ponder and strategize. I had learned a lot of new concepts and approaches and felt a little conceited of assuming that I was already ahead of the race. On joining, I immediately got down to work. First I realized, that deliverables were imperative so they were the constants which always had an upwards change. I needed to figure out the remaining factors that would positively impact the constant

factor. I devised my own strategy and the first month saw a decline in my deliverable graph. The world was crashing on my head and now I had to figure within no time, what I did wrong and what I needed to change. With no clue whatsoever, I sat dumfounded at my desk finally resolving to go back the general school way. There at least my graphs were impressive. I'd rather settle with the human exertion. I got a call from my marketing head and he wanted to meet me for the obvious reasons. During the discussion, I mentioned to him my new found strategy. Immediately he explained, that it was good thinking on my part but was quick to highlight the deficiencies. He suggested me a few steps and I immediately jotted then down and we even discussed implementing the same universally, if this worked out. The next month, the graph was in a different mood altogether. I nearly made up on my previous performance and definitely excelled on the current. Immediately a meeting was held, and our marketing head asked me to present the strategy. With a little brain storming, on a few points, the strategy drove down well with the rest of the team and naturally performances were much better universally. With this development, I was on my way to

an elevation so I was nominated to attend a seminar along with 4 other colleagues.

The seminar was a unique experience as it opened many more new doors and windows. We came to know, how the global markets think and strategize. Back with some really good knowledge, my career embarked upon newer heights. A very long association of seven years with the company saw me transitioning from the middle management to the senior position grooming many young professionals, mentoring batches and seeing them grow over the years. At this juncture, I had to handle attrition which specifically plagued this industry. Making young employees understand the value of stability, knowledge and growth, was challenging but it did work and I had brought attrition down in my department to quite a decent figure. I would like to mention here that, the key to stick to a very challenging job which might seem too taxing on even the human system, is to strategize, innovate and most importantly engage with the seniors. The thought process of one's own along with the experience of a senior person, creates avenues for newer workable strategies and more knowledge. Learning after a point is a knack that needs to be kept alive and seeking for

innovation paves way for a very successful career. A company will always nurture a thinking employee if that employee positively impacts the business. Quitting is always an easier option, but a rolling stone gathers no moss.

With over 140000 employees worldwide, one of the top ten MNCs of the country was my next stop. The industry had changed and so did the deliverables. The rules separate. I was overwhelmed with the vastness. The office, the system, the logistics, the finesse, everything was at the next level. During my 5 valuable years in this company I had managed to get certified on many standards and also experienced the benefits of various leadership development programs. The attrition was significantly high in this particular industry and the reason was extremely dismaying. The first level executives found fun in spending six months on the job before they found a new one with a better pay. Stability was the last in their list of priorities and for many, this was a stop gap before they completed their studies and opt for their campus placements. Holding back was an extremely tough job and the industry satisfied itself by putting the attrition rate as a standard high.

My first approach was making the executive understand their value as employees. How their short term incumbency would affect their resume and more importantly, how this would impact their thinking. The size that was under my map, seemed to respond well and I saw a decline in the attrition figures. That was heartening but still a long way to go. With regular interactions and sessions with the young people, I gathered that in spite of the grandeur of the company, what was clashing was their field of their jobs. A technical department saw people from HR and even engineers, whose knowledge, was not being completely utilized. Like the many benefits of being with an MNC, one of them was intercompany transfer. The parent arm which was a core technology arm, often filled up vacancies from its BPO arm should the employee fit their requirement. This was in fact a very good option. Not only had an employee the benefit a stable job for a year and a half, if he or she fitted the bill, the next change was his or her dream come true. I would like to suggest to all managers here that career pathing of your team members, is one of the most important aspects of handling attrition. One of the primary causes of attrition, is the young and fresh executive is not

aware of the fruits of a stable career and many a times, is misled and misguided by external triggers. It is imperative, that career pathing should be a compulsory activity for all managers. Next is regular one to one interaction. In any demanding industry, it is extremely important for any employee in any capacity to have a word with his senior or mentor. Even I have experienced, managers feel the need to talk to their respective seniors to understand the worth of their incumbency. The true trait of a great manager is to give vision to his team, to make them align with the bigger picture and most importantly make them understand their importance. A true manager will do wonders with outliers, if he knows how to handle them. Every person has a plus point and it is the role of a good manager to identify that and align the same with the person's jobs. The gaps need to be mentored and failures need to be addressed with guidance. The very fact that this particular employee has made through the hiring and training process and hence has in himself or herself the basic qualities to survive the operational metrics. Giving up on an employee is the easiest choice but to groom and make that person perform, is what good managers are all

about. I remember, I used to often tell my managers, that if you fail, it means I haven't done a good job. Your failure happened over a period of time and I failed to notice. The very fact that attention is not always on whether things are spot on, but also where things are missing and immediately addressing that with a positive approach, is what quality management is.

After working for 21 years in small medium and large MNCs, I finally settled down with my own company. A part of our services are business coaching. I never feel the slightest dearth in my desire to mentor and coach young executives, budding managers, budding senior managers because even as a professional, it is not important to have a team to mentor or coach, because the world waits with its treasure of aspiring professionals and leaders who would go a billion miles if they know what they are capable and worthy of.

Subhopati Sanyal

COO, The Nistula Group