Competent Teams for Challenging Times

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ABSTRACT

Challenges of business activities have become complex and demanding with the passage of time. Skills required to keep pace with the changing requirements of the market have also increased many folds, to the extent that super specialties in every profession and industry has become the norm of the day. The methodology of building talent itself has undergone a sea change. The urge to attain greater heights in the professional arena at a young age in this highly competitive business world is pushing a large number of people towards multifarious academic activities. Mushrooming of educational institutes offering a plethora of certifications and degrees in a variety of fields has further added fuel to the aspirations of the younger generation. While many of these institutions lack even the basic infrastructure, they are nowhere near to providing quality education.

Competency building is a multi-faceted process, which not only involves multiple players but also innumerable processes extending over a long period of time. This long gestation period has its toll, both positive and negative, on the individuals and organizations. The task of assembling and putting into place a highly competent team though an uphill task, efforts invested in this direction pays off in the long run. Organizations who have done it over a period of time have demonstrated the value addition to business objectives accrued by the contributions of their employees. In the backdrop of this situation at ground zero, while the debate on ownership of the final sculpting of these aspirants is on, it has been assumed partially by educational institutions. However, much more needs to be done by organizations to create champions at work places, who can not only deliver but also lead teams through tough time. The question that needs to be addressed is - who should take on this herculean task and how should it be executed?

Introduction

The potential of an earnest man at his work cannot be measured, and every organization has always strived to have earnest men in their teams. The need for competent personnel has never been more critical as of today, with inflation at 9.87%[1]

and looking northwards in the days to come; overall efficiency is the need of the hour for every business.

The identification of an earnest man and setting him on the right course on his work is the biggest challenge that organizations face. However, the

moulding of an earnest man is another challenging and daunting task that is undertaken by the educational institutions where the foundations are future growth is laid. While the schooling is the most elementary stage of this task, for the sake of this audience, this discussion will focus on the activities post entry into a degree college. It is from this stage onwards, that a well-informed individual, courtesy the internet and easy access to loads of information, has the liberty of choosing from a variety of career options.

Starting from the early 1990s with the IT boom, coupled with the Y2K rush, saw a phenomenal growth in the demand for employment in specific task oriented domains. One of the beneficiaries of this growing employment demand was the training institutes which mushroomed all over, offering task specific skill development trainings, thereby creating "specialized" resources, and this trend continues even to date. The ingress of IT and ITES across all sectors, construction, manufacturing, administration etc, ensured that the employment of this "specialized" HR pool was gainfully employed on unrelated and isolated tasks over the years.

The practice all along, commencing from about 1980s, has been to create silos of narrowed and specialized task oriented manpower, which has facilitated HR practitioners to circumvent labour laws for selfish and profitable ends. This practice, which has created a mind-set amongst Gen Y on specialized qualifications, has turned educational institutions to production lines,

churning out "incompetent" manpower and dumping them in the marketplace. The dot com bubble burst of 2000 and the global financial crisis of 2008 saw layoffs by the thousands. Along with the tough economic conditions and uncertainty of the future, came the spate of work pressure related deaths and desperate suicides both in India and outside. Studies have revealed that anxiety at work place, erratic job market and work related stresses are some of the major causes of suicides amongst the urban youth,[2] and amongst the public sector organizations.[3] While financial constraints have been a major cause of layoffs, "competency" has been the only factor for segregation and identification of individual employees for laying off. In most of the cases the "frogs" have been the first ones to go, while the "jacks" have continued for longer periods.

Unfortunately the demand for competencies has been manipulated by the market and organizations, with little or no regard to the employees overall growth. A plethora of certifications available in the market provide temporary insulation from market uncertainties and a false sense of security. No wonder, than that, professionals with 20+ years of experience who still crave for ITEL and Black Belt in Six Sigma certifications, continue to remain as "frogs in deep dark wells"!!!!

A study on hiring practices across all industry sectors has revealed that Indian companies have lost ʻ2,460 crores in the year 2012 due to bad hiring, and some of

the major reasons identified for this are pressure and urgency to fill up positions, wrong bench marking and poor screening.[4] In spite of millions of graduates from thousands of technical and management institutions flooding the job market every year, ironically, a global study has revealed that while 35% of employers worldwide are reporting manpower shortages, 61% of employers in India experienced difficulty in "finding" the right staff!!![5]

Educational Institutions and their role in the current mess

The institutions of professional and higher education have been corporatized to an extent that the administrative teams have a tremendous pressure to generate revenues to justify the ROI to promoters of these institutions. The commoditization of education has been adversely commented in various forums. While a study on the employment trends in IT and ITES industry in India has reported that of the 1.5 million students who graduate out of the 3393 engineering colleges in India, nearly 70% remain jobless on graduation and of this nearly 30% continue to be jobless even after a year[6].

To justify the hefty fees that institutions charge for professional and management education, these institutions literally play around with the emotions of the students. Feeding information, especially campus placements and salaries offered, they entice many students and also ensure availability of educational loans by tie ups with banks. While it makes business

sense for the banks, the educational institutions are committing a major blunder by unrealistic fueling of the aspirations of prospective students and their parents. Their responsibility ends with the successful completion of the course, and educational institutions got to unimaginable extent to ensure that the student completes the course successfully. Mass copying[7], innumerable retests, assignments in lieu of tests and presentations, are some of the damaging approaches adopted by institutions to achieve their selfish motive. End result being incompetent students being dumped into the market, who are ignorant and ill equipped on how to fend for themselves in life[8].The NPA on account of defaulted educational loans amongst the public sector banks as on Jun 2013 was ' 832 crores against a sanctioned loan amount of ' 8,297 crores[9], an amount which has been pocketed by the educational institutions. Disappointments when aspirations that define success and happiness are distorted or unmet by the reality faced by young people in a rapidly changing society, has been attributed as one of the main reasons for suicides in India amongst the youth in the age group of 15 – 29 years[10]. Such is the catastrophic consequences attributed to the ineffectiveness of educational systems.

Some of the other factors of concern in this regard, which are talked off in the academic circle and do not need any major discussions are inadequacies in faculty capabilities and lack of infrastructural support. While lack of financial incentives

has been cited for demotivated faculty members, it will be worthwhile to look at the satisfaction and pride derived in the success of their students as an immeasurable reward and continues to remain motivated to contribute for the success of this journey.

Roadmap for self-improvement

To enrich the journey from educational institutions to organizational employment, the contribution of all stakeholders in the eco system of education needs a revamp. Nevertheless, one cannot sit idle waiting for things to happen. In our own small sphere of influence, i.e., at individual faculty, individual departments and individual institutions one can experiment with some aspects and in case the results are encouraging, it can be replicated to the next level. In this context some areas where improvements can be internalized within institutions are:-

➢ *Tiered approach to higher education.* Statistics of starting salary offered during college placements, at both IIMs and other B Schools; reveal that students with work experience are preferred compared to fresher graduates, with some freak exceptions. This is an indicator to the value given to the combination of experience and knowledge. Even a global study by the ILO has indicated that the unemployment rate at 13.1 % amongst the youth (15 – 25 years) is three times that of adult unemployment rate[11]. While higher technical education in continuation with the undergraduate studies makes sense and adds value to the learning, higher management courses without work experience definitely has its limitations on the understanding of management theories and practices, and their applicability in the workplace context. Therefore, to enhance productivity and add value to the acquisition of knowledge through formal higher education, a multi-tiered approach to higher education, especially management education,. A pattern like – basic graduation – work experience (0 – 3 years) – certification courses – back to work (5 – 8 years) – Diploma/ Masters. This approach would not only enrich the learning, but also make the classrooms intellectually challenging. Same theories and principles being discussed in the background of varied experiences from different industries will also challenge the faculties phenomenally and ensure that they also continue to upgrade their knowledge on a daily basis.

➢ *Redefine eligibility criteria.* Though there are some basic standards for admissions to many management schools, the efficacy of such screening systems is questioned. In fact even Mr Narayan Murthy had expressed his anguish over the coaching class culture which was instrumental in dumping poor quality students into the IITs and opined to change this commercial approach to education[12]. This poor selection procedure has its toll on both the institutions and the individual students. A more robust and realistic assessment system which enables an

individual to decide whether to pursue an expensive higher education program or not will do a lot of good to the entire education system and optimize resource utilization of the system.

➤ *Industry – Academia interface.* The current state of Industry – Academia interface has to be taken to a different level. The industry involvement should primarily include identifying gaps in the existing curriculum which needs to be plugged to increase the employability of students[13] rather than only for campus placements. Also, guest lectures on non-academic subjects by seasoned professionals from the industry will definitely be a value addition, which will go a long way in giving a better perception of the work place requirements and expectations.

➤ *Inculcating   life   skills.* Management is all about people management. It is the behaviour and performance of team members that managers have to manage to align performance to organizational objectives. Tolerance, identification, acceptance and correction of shortcomings of self and other team members, attitude management, moral courage to accept failure and move in in life are some essential life skills which students should be encouraged to master. Failure to develop life skills will not only induce stress in individuals and also spread amongst the team like wildfire. Life skills ensure emotional and professional stability in the functioning of individuals, failing

which erratic behaviour can prove costly. Suicides, murders and other forms of vengeance display at workplace have become common phenomenon, hitherto unimaginable[14].

Policy enactment to standardize practices across the nation requires success stories from all quarters, and unless every educational institution courageously experiments with new thoughts and ideas, the right approach will always remain elusive.

CONCLUSIONS

It is the set of the sails, and not the direction of the wind that determines which way we go. Educational institutions should undertake this task of teaching how to set the sails rather in teaching aligning the ship to the direction of the wind. Learning institutions actively engaged in knowledge enhancement add value to the society than those which are just mass production units, who justify their existence only by numbers enrolled, graduated and placed. There is a collective responsibility of all stakeholders in this transformation which educational institutions must undertake to revolutionize the journey from education to employment.

In times of drastic changes, it is the learner who inherits the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists. -Eric Hoffer.

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