

## Questioning Aloud – 2

### Do we run the risk of becoming ‘employee friendly and employee centric’ in a dysfunctional way?

- **Value of being ‘employee friendly and employee centric’:** I must start this article by stating that I fully understand and believe in the value of creating a work culture with high degree of empowerment, freedom and autonomy. If workplaces have to become transformational spaces that enable growth of individuals and create value for all stakeholders, treating employees as significant partners in progress is a no brainer.

Over the years, clearly, organizations in India have become more employee centric and empowering. Trying sincerely and seriously to ensure that the employees feel that they are cared for, and also giving the employees much higher degree of freedom, autonomy and voice than what was typically given in the past. Undoubtedly this is a movement in the right direction, which will help employees develop careers that they find meaningful and exciting and also at the same time building high performing organizations.

- **Risk of losing the balance :** And while I am a big supporter and believer of these principles – I have started feeling that at times and in certain situations, organizations now run the risk of being ‘employee friendly and employee centric’ in an excessive and completely wrong way. These are situations, where some employees completely disregard their side of the responsibility and start treating all privileges as one-sided ‘bestowed entitlements’. And supervisors and HR teams fail in their governance role, driven by the compulsive need to keep people happy and to avoid all difficult conversations. **Please allow me to explain with help of real life examples that I have heard from my friends across different companies –**
  - *Rampant misuse of flexi time, location flexibility and trust based attendance policies*
  - *(Almost) Unlimited number of team / individual / festival celebrations / off sites / out-bounds on company expense*
  - *Managers and leaders dragging their feet to take tough actions on employees who have committed confirmed acts of intellectual integrity violations – ONLY to keep such employees happy and avoid the hassle of terminating such employees and managing transitions*
  - *Managers feeling compulsive need to constantly shower their employees with some kind of monetary /material and glamorous awards and believing that that’s the only way to keep them ‘motivated’*
  - *Managers feeling extremely hesitant to give clear and direct feedback about improvement areas or lapses on the employee’s part on values / standards of behaviour – hence many employees getting away with poor performance and bad behaviour for extended period of time.*

- **What’s the damage?** If such behaviours and patterns go unchecked, over the years, they will seriously damage the organization’s culture – the focus on performance, stretch, excellence, intellectual integrity can seriously get weakened and organizations can turn into cosy clubs of collusion – where people can get into implicit pacts of partnership about not disturbing the status quo, so that everyone can survive comfortably (unfortunately at a great cost to long term health and performance of the organization)

The worst damage this does is to morale of hard working, competent employees with high integrity – they start feeling that the organization does not have the desire and/or the ability to see the difference between them and the other employees who are free riders. While the competent, hardworking employees don’t lower their standards of behaviour (because most often these are intrinsically driven), they do lose a lot of energy and commitment due to the organization’s inability to call out and stop bad behaviour.

- **How can we prevent this?** : As it is often the case, the ultimate answer to such issues lies in leadership – the organization needs to have leaders with **High Character** (driven to do what is right for long term health and well-being of the employees and the organization) and **High Competence** (having the leadership and technical competence to operate at the right ‘level’ of leadership hierarchy. Such leaders will never tolerate lapses and bad behaviours to maintain dysfunctional peace – but will be the courage and capability to call out such lapses, take tough corrective actions (including terminations, if needed) and managing the transitions – while ensuring that the ball does not drop on performance.

*In 'Questioning Aloud', I hope to think and question aloud about things happening in the world of work and leadership. As a student of human behaviour, I want to ask myself and to all others who are interested, a few questions that will hopefully help all of us take a pause, reflect and act to make the world of work better.*

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