Relationship-Building – Lessons from Mutiny on the Bounty

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Introduction

Mutiny on the Bounty is one of the rare films that have been produced thrice – 1935, 1962, and 1984. The films bring out three key leadership lessons.

One, the pursuit of **dual goals** is distractive. You may recall the South Pole expeditions led by Captain Robert Scott and the Norwegian Roald Amundsen. The main reason why Amundsen beat Scott to the race by one month was because his goal was simple and direct: *Reach the South Pole first*. Scott, on the other hand, also wanted to conduct scientific experiments en route. In the process he lost strategic focus and encumbered his logistics. Captain William Bligh, the captain of the Bounty, was mandated to collect breadfruit plants from Tahiti and deliver them to the native plantations in Jamaica. When the ship reached Tahiti, the sensuality of this Pacific Island was so attractive, that some of the sailors got married to the natives and enjoyed the lay pleasures of the island and its people for over five months. In the process Bligh lost complete focus on his goal.

Two, Bligh was a believer of **mission first, people second**. To him people were expendable and secondary to the success of his mission. Bligh is quoted as saying, "*It is a matter of supernatural indifference to me whether you contaminate the natives or the natives contaminate you. I have but one concern – our mission.*"

Bligh's relationship with his seamen was contemptuous to put it mildly. The conversation goes something like this:

Bligh: *"What's your name?"*

Seaman Thomas Ellison: *Thomas Ellison, sir. Pressed into service. Got a wife, a baby."*

Bligh: *I asked you your name, not the history of your misfortunes."*

After the death of one sailor as a result of an order by Bligh, Fletcher requests for a proper burial. Bligh explodes at him, *"Never mind Norman! We lost one full league before I countermanded your order."* He may have been able to achieve his mandate had he motivated his crew on why it was important to take the breadfruit saplings to the West Indies. It is not enough to have a goal and even keep on sharing it ad nauseam. Leaders down the chain must explain why the goal has been selected in the first place? And how the goal will benefit those affected?

Three, one direct fallout of the belief that people should be subordinated to the mission was the low importance Bligh gave to **relationships**. Bligh is on record to say, *"Why should an alleged gentleman give his first loyalty to ordinary seamen?"* This is an

extremely pertinent lesson in the 21st century for educational institutions, governments, businesses, and nations. Bligh lacked respect for his team and humiliated them publicly. He could not accept constructive criticism; and had a self-esteem problem. He had one more fatal flaw. He believed that fear is the best motivator. Bligh was known to say, *"Cruelty with a purpose is not cruelty, it's efficiency."*

For the purposes of this Retreat I have selected **relationship-building** for greater understanding and discussion. This is a 21st century competency all leaders, particularly teachers, must have in abundance.

What is Relationship-Building?

The word *relationship* evokes an affinity or bond between two persons or groups. It is about connectivity. In personal relations this may be so; but as a leadership competency, relationship goes much beyond these parameters.

In its wider meaning, relationship must connect people emotionally and intellectually as well. Enduring relationships have to be founded on intellectual bonding. Relationship-building involves:

- Collaboration within teams and stakeholders.

- Making thought connections and alignments, and thinking aloud with one's team. Sharing personal and organizational vision is an example.

- Listening and reflecting on 360° feedback.

- Reflection and think-time for creativity, problem-solving, re-examining assumptions of an organization, and giving strategic direction.

Challenges in Relationship-Building

In an increasingly interconnected world, wherein titles, positions, and hierarchies are being flattened by the day, **collaboration** is a survival skill. And collaboration is about relationships. Collaboration leads to relationships. In schools, collaboration translates itself into **collegiality**. This is a difficult barrier to cross because teachers by nature like to work in silos, and are defensive to corrective feedback from peers. Unless we change this mindset, learning cannot happen, professional growth cannot take place, and a sense of ownership will never take root.

We are so influenced by **market-thinking** that relationship-building has taken a back-seat in our scheme of things. Market sloganeering supports the idea that *"the business of business is business."* In reality, the business of business is people. In this new understanding, relationship is the new buzz word.

While market economy is welcome, market-thinking is damaging as it erodes values and makes money the only thing that matters. The feeling has grown that

everything has a price, and is therefore purchasable. Moral reasoning has little space in such thinking.

Social media is a serious challenge in building relationships. Having 300 friends on Facebook doesn't make a person social or a people-oriented leader. There is no substitute for human contact. Leadership is about relationships; this is why we are here for four days. The deeper the relationships, the stronger will be your leadership, and the greater your self-awareness. I have nothing against technology as long as it is considered as a tool.

It is not only leaders who need to connect; people within organizations also need to connect with each other. A good leader must facilitate and encourage relationships, and not be wary of them.

What is Your Psychographic Profile?

It may be interesting for each one of us to be aware of our predisposition that shapes our thinking towards high-performing teams, Take a piece of paper and draw anyone of the following shapes: a circle, a triangle, a square, and a Z. This simple test indicates the following:

a. Circle: Individualistic and disorganized

Relationships are critical for

them Do out-of-the-box thinking

Embrace change Avoid being

boxed-in

b. Triangle Will do anything to get to the top

Ruthlessly single-minded

c. Square   Believe in rigour and discipline

Process-minded and analytical

d. Zee   Non-conformist

Life is about fun and pleasure

The Importance of Relationships for Leaders

In the age of command and control leadership, building relationships had little importance. But in a world that is increasingly flat and interconnected, relationship is a core leadership competency. In our emerging world where the focus is shifting from institutions to the power of teams, relationships assume critical importance.

We realize our dreams, our vision, aspirations, and goals through other people; never alone. This is the true meaning of the African proverb, **ubantu**. We are what we are because of other people. We need relationships to be happy, to succeed, and become what we are capable of becoming.

High performing teams deliver not because of individual best. Super-leaders by themselves do not make for high performing teams; it is the quality of **social bonding and personal trust** each one has for the other that is decisive. I have steadfastly maintained that average persons working as a team can produce extraordinary results, as against above average individuals who are not team players. At the end of the day, **people are loyal to people, and not an organization**.

Attributes for Relationship-Building

Vulnerability

Usually vulnerability is seen as a weakness. That is how the dictionary defines it. In leaders this should not be seen as a disadvantage. Being authentic is a great way to lead one's life. Great leaders do not hide their vulnerabilities; they share them with people, whom they trust. Vulnerabilities are one's inner thoughts, fears, concerns, doubts, and even weaknesses. By being open about them, leaders gain the trust and respect of their people, and are often able to turn formal work relationships into real long term friendships.

Vulnerability is another name for transparency and a clear signal that the leader is open to learning and feedbacks. Leaders are not infallible; they are human; and followers like to see them as such. They are not expected to have all the answers. They have the courage to say *"I do not know."*

Leaders who believe and practise vulnerability do not surround themselves with "yes" men. That is the most dangerous thing a leader can do. Leaders need to be told when they are failing or going wrong, as also when there is a better way to achieve desired results – than theirs.

Candour

Performance cannot improve by practice alone; there have to be feedback. More often than not, the feedback can be hurting and even demoralising. Most people do not like feedback unless they are positive. This is the primary reason why we prefer to surround ourselves with subordinates who give only the good news. We don't want to hear the truth, the brutal facts. If you want to be great leaders you need to have the courage to face the truth, and invite and encourage an honest critique from others

Feedback is gifts and not threats. I would like to know what my detractors are saying and thinking. Keep in mind the following golden rules while giving or receiving feedback.

One, **make people safe** before giving a feedback. They must never feel that this is the end of the world or that they are going to lose their friendship or job, or go down in the others estimation. You give honest feedback only to those whom you care about.

Two, feedbacks work both ways. If your superior has not given a feedback; then **ask him for one**. Be specific by saying in what area of work, relationship, or leadershipyou want a feedback. Frame the question carefully. For example, you may say, *"I amvery keen to become a workshop leader or curriculum coordinator. Could you please tellme all that I need to know and do to be one?"*

Three, say **"thank you,"** or you will not receive any more feedback.

Four, **reflect** on the feedback and act.

Five, after some time has elapsed, **return to the person** who gave you the feedback, and ask whether he or she has seen any improvement in you.

Candour does not mean consensus although consensus is desirable. If you insist too much on arriving at consensus, you may end up with mediocrity, or loss of creativity, or both. Candour means giving people voice; if they have had their say they won't be resentful. Let people express themselves freely, and debate their views and opinions; thereafter leaders can take a decision.

How to Deepen One's Relationships?

All relationships can be measured. These are of five types:

0 – I don't know you.

1 – We are kind of aware of each other.

2 – We exchange "Hellos".

3 – An acquaintance.

4 – A friend whom we care about.

5 – A friend whom we take for granted. We can open his refrigerator and take out what we want without his permission.

In this Retreat, commit yourself to deepen your relationship with two individuals from 2 to 3 or 3 to 4 in the next two months. Make this commitment. Find ways to like them. Do a background study; avoid prejudice; find out their passions; and look for reasons to like them.

Reflective Thinking in Your Organization

The most serious challenge in our personal and work-life is the **culture of immediacy**, which is responsible for bias towards immediate action, especially regarding issues which are urgent but not important.

Technology makes matters worse by giving us the illusion of **multi-tasking**. The human brain can process one bit of information at a time; not two or more. Multi-tasking is a myth.

Most of us find it difficult to pause and **think while at work**. On average, 65 percent time in a day is spent on work; with 30 percent on interruptions, distractions, and recovery time to get back on track; with just about 5 percent time for any meaningful thinking.

Teachers must give high priority to strategies on how to be reflective at home and in school. **First**, lessons should be for a minimum period of **50 minutes** to make time available for thinking by teachers and students. Further, lesson plans should include greater time for **student-talk**. Teachers have the habit of talking for most of the time in class. As a guide the desirable ratio of **teacher-student talk-time** should be 30:70. Moreover, in order to force critical thinking, teachers should ask questions that force**think-time** of a minimum of 5-10 seconds for students.

Second, meetings and presentations in schools are a familiar occurrence. However, most of us enter meetings and listen to PowerPoint presentations unprepared. To force think-time to think through issues and thereby ensure meaningful outcomes **agendas for meetings**, **synopsis of presentations** should be circulated well in advance.

Reflection Guide for School Leaders

All teachers are leaders; they teach the whole child and prepare them for life. As teacher-leaders they are expected to reflect and transform themselves as well as their students. The following suggestions are made:

1. **Designate a prime time** anytime during the day for reflection. I prefer the morning because the environment is relatively quiet and body and mind have been well rested. Bill Gates is known to take a week off for thinking.

2. Each of our schools should **create a reflective culture** where teachers and students can speak their minds without any fear of reprisals, including pointing out shortcomings in the organization.

3. Great institutions like Indus should not be content with the status quo. Each school must step back frequently and re-examine **fundamental assumptions,**

and **strategic direction.** A key role of senior school leaders is to inject reflection and prevent the status quo mentality.

4. The biggest deficiency is the **lack of time to reflect** especially in the midst of one's teaching routine. To enable a few key staff to reflect, you may consider creating some **redundancy in leadership ranks**.

5. Much of a leader's time is taken up with operational matters like budgeting, HR issues, administration, policing, and detailed coordination. Although necessary, these activities do not require any deep and strategic thinking. Given the day to day challenges of routine teaching or managing a school, how do we structure time to promote and encourage reflection and think-time? How do we **re-think teaching in the midst of teaching**? How do we unleash our reflective capacity by structuring think-time during our heavy work-overloads?

6. Think and **reflect before a meeting or a presentation** so that you can ask pertinent questions, identify critical issues, and think of workable solutions. One must never enter a meeting or discussion unprepared. Those who present should send background papers and material well in advance.

7. Stefan Sagmeister runs a design studio in New York. He revealed at a TED conference that every seven years he closes his company for one year for all employees to think. The granting of **sabbaticals** based on merit and service for a selected teacher enables her to break contact from one's "busyness" and mundane routine, and engage her mind. These sabbaticals could be with or without pay and for even shorter duration.

Teacher-Student Relationship Challenges

I am concerned about **shrinking student motivation** as it is affecting effective learning; which in turn is also lowering teacher morale. A large number of students do not like school or do hard work. School sucks! Learning cannot happen if students are not motivated. This is a world-wide phenomenon and India is no exception. In fact, our problem at Indus is more severe because children from privileged backgrounds do not have the same motivation as those who come from less-privileged sections of our society. To add to our woes, there is also the mindset of the millennial generation.

There is another issue I want to share with you. By 2019 about 15 percent of a school's student population will comprise **underprivileged children**. In the debate and

court cases to the run-up of the implementation of the RTE Bill, maximum opposition has been from teachers. Is this a good sign? Is it indicative of a class bias? If we do not address this, it will have an impact upon teacher-student relationships in the future.

Do teachers have a bias towards students who are academically weak?

The nature of teacher-student relationships impacts student motivation and learning in classrooms. Student-motivation is the prime responsibility of the teacher. After all, the student spends 7 hours every day for 10 months in school. If the student is interested in the teacher, the student will be interested in the subject. I have often heard the odd remark that so and so teacher connects well with students. What do we mean by "connects well?" Is it because she is fun and is cool? Or teaches the subject well? To me, a teacher who connects well with students is one who role-models everything that stands for relationships, namely:

1. Is caring and teaches the whole child and not just the subject.

2. Is a mentor who identifies the talent and passion in a child and nurtures it.

3. Who enables the student to become a self-directed learner.

4. Motivates the student to perform to the fullest both in and outside the classroom.

When a teacher connects with the student, learning will happen.

Conclusion

The future belongs to relationships and thinking – critical thinking and reflective thinking. To be a 21st century leader you need to be a team player and a good thinker, a thinker who can hold two opposing ideas in her head at the same time. Leaders can be effective provided they increase contact time with their team and practise the art of introducing quality think-time in their routine, and generate group dialogues and strategic conversations within their organizations.

With every passing day we are drowning in a sea of data and distraction. The challenge before is clear: what will matter more to us and to our organizations – data or meaning? Should future dialogues be prevented from being virtual only, or should we accord higher value to face-to-face discussion? Are schools doing enough to encourage teachers and students who are "digital natives", to think alone and in groups? Does every class lesson provoke thinking?.The challenge for every teacher is to create a thoughtful classroom environment.

These are some of the unknown imponderables we need to reflect on.

Group Reflection

1. "Tell us about the greatest personal struggle you've had in your life – the one thing that has most influenced who you are today? Are you prepared to share it with your team? For me, Sadbhavna was the turning point; my greatest spurt in emotional and spiritual growth occurred.

2. "What's keeping you up at night – Career? Family? Job? Superior? Subordinates? Your uncertain future?"

3. Recommend three major strategies for improving the quality of relationships in Indus.

4. How can teachers motivate students for higher academic performance? Do you think that some of the recommendations made by Daniel T Willingham in his book Why Students Like School Don't?, are relevant?

Individual Presentations

10 minutes presentations

1. **Setting personal and academic goals by students.**

2. **Role-modelling core values of the school.**

3. **Paying individual attention to students.**

4. **Explaining the relevance or** *why* **of what is being taught. Classroom teaching must have relevance in real-life situations.**

5. **Imparting skills for self-directed learning.**

6. **Raise expectations of students.**