

RockStars
Growing Stellar Performers in Organizations

Rozaine Cooray and Pujitha Silva

At work

Just a week ago, I didn't know what I was signing up for when I had that crucial conversation on my performance feedback

with the new Managing Director. My feedback had been excellent as always; what else can you expect from a fiercely ambitious manager who has diligently mastered the art of his functional unit over the years? I am known to be a good manager, approachable, open-minded and friendly, but also focused and serious about delivery. Mainly, my job has been to make decisions, give guidance, train people on their tasks and manage the overall operations, and 'operations' is what I am good at. Being an engineer by profession, I have always worked with systems and processes, and numbers and analyses are what I am comfortable with.

Six months ago, my former boss had opted for an early retirement due to his deteriorating health. A workaholic himself, this realization that he may have spent too much time at office under tremendous stress over the years, had occurred far too late. The team and I dearly miss him but we are also thankfully relieved that he had invested much in our growth so that we have been able to operate without a boss till now.

Today, when the MD asks me whether I happen to have any concerns, I don't hesitate to be honest about the boredom that is setting in. I am thirty-five years old, and have faithfully served this company for twelve years now and it has been my home since I joined the workforce as a management trainee. My former boss had been talking to me about setting up the operations in a new plant that is coming up in the vicinity and the possible vacancy as the Factory Manager. He had told me that I topped the list in the succession plan, so last year was all about training and coaching for this unannounced position. I knew that there were others who were

more experienced than me and that such a promotion would be a contentious one. However, I was willing to take up the challenge as this role would finally validate why I had worked so hard all these years and stayed with the company, despite having had opportunities to join other companies which probably were better paymasters.

Honestly apart from having the two kids, career-wise, life has not been very challenging in the last five years. Of course I have had transfers from one plant to another to train and ensure quality and productivity and to initiate new processes and have new systems up and running. However, the satisfaction has been somewhat short-lived. My growth within the company has been mostly horizontal – acquiring different variations of the same skill. What I now want is something more, even though I don't know how to articulate what I want. The new MD (who I hear is from the US and a trusted friend of the owners of the company) seems to be a task-master. During our initial chat, he asks me whether I am willing to take up a different task but doesn't make any mention of the position that I have been trained for.

He mentions that he is not happy, and is in fact disturbed by the rate of turnover and absenteeism amongst the machine operators, a phenomenon that has been constantly high for many, many years.

This is an industry trend, and I hope he is aware of it.

He describes how internal research based on exit interviews and community research externalized the reasons, attributing it to new mushrooming factories in the neighborhood offering better incentives.

I mention to him the personal and social issues faced by our female workers, and how we have over the years provided them with support and empowered them as much as we could, to which he responds, 'Now, this is all true. Except that it is not the total picture'.

He emphatically mentions that the internal research maybe biased, that it fails to see the loopholes within our own system; he adds that we need to have a better emotional working environment.

'People think it's just about the incentives. There's more, there's definitely more to what meets the eye. People leave their bosses Roy, not necessarily the company. And I am sure there are other reasons and we need to get to the root of the problem to see why people are leaving at this rate. I don't think we are inhuman; in fact we have some of the best CSR initiatives in the country. However, we may be mechanical in how we relate to our people or make them feel. We have to get off our high horses and connect with them at their level. This is why our corporate office and the high end executives can be very unpopular amongst them. This is your model factory. You change this factory and give us the recipe to replicate it in other factories too', he says.

Eh! Hold on! Isn't it...

'Look, I want to get it done. We have to address this. I want to put you in charge of a change initiative that involves all the line managers and supervisors of the machine operators. One, I want to see how the workers feel about their supervisors, one by one, with all the names included. Two, I want you to give these managers feedback the way you think is right. You make a call on that. Three, I want you to tell them that they have six months to change and that we will support them in whatever way possible. At the end of six months, we would carry out this study again and if they have failed to change by then, we will have to let them go. I want to make this factory great. That's why I have been hired and you are my man for this, Roy'.

I stare at him, completely startled by his request; in my opinion, it is lopsided. We, as a company, are doing really well, so why upset the apple cart? We hit the numbers even before the

stipulated timelines and our managers have endured and served the company during tough times. How arrogant of him to think that his initiative would change anything for the better.

If at all, it'll be disastrous. Who the hell hired this guy?! And hey, listen. The engineer in me likes to keep the talking to a minimum and focus on what needs to be done, step by step, systematically. I am not comfortable with listening to how people 'feel'; as wrong as it may sound, that is the truth. I think people should come to work in order to work. Feelings are for family and home.

I am lost in a whirlwind of thoughts.

'I have observed you Roy,' he continues. 'I think you are the right person; you have the right temperament. You have so far not offended anyone. Everyone likes you and you are good at what you do. You have credibility because you know what you are talking about'.

'Not when it comes to this', I tell him still horrified by the thought of it. 'I am clueless'.

'You'll learn the ropes around this job. Just a heads up. It's going to be tough, so be prepared to be the bad guy. I am sure now, we will be able to talk about your real growth in six months. Make me proud and moreover, make yourself proud', he adds encouragingly.

What? I am flabbergasted. This is not the offer I have been expecting. This offer seems to be that of an underdogs, leaving me speechless and somewhat paralyzed from the neck downwards. Maybe there is a hidden agenda. Maybe this guy is setting me up for failure so if we didn't perform as a team, he could blame it on me. Why should I even trust this man? Maybe I should speak to the cluster CEO or GM. But by doing that, will I breach the pecking order? Shock mode on; my mind is a tornado of questions and indignations.

The company has invested on expensive executive training programs for the top performers, and I have been sent on some of the most prestigious ones so to speak. This is payback time, yes, but hey! Can some new guy order me around like this to fire people if it comes to that? Am I not too young for this role to begin with? How would most of the senior management respond to this?

'I need to grab something to eat before my next meeting; it's the management meeting and I will tell the board that I have put you in charge. This is coming from the top Roy - the 'very top'; first priority of the quarter. We will announce the role tomorrow to the factory. It is a double promotion in my opinion, 'Head of Change Management' and you would directly report to me. If you are wondering what HR would say about it- they already know, and they think that it is better that a separate unit handles it'.

'The very top, meaning the "founders"?' I ask.

'Yes, I was specifically asked to come from the US to see that things are done differently. I was an engineer myself there working for Ford', he explains.

'I don't know. This is definitely beyond the scope of what I can offer to this company. I know nothing about change management. Besides, I was trained to oversee the operations of the new plant', I say, overwhelmed.

My wife usually tells me I am painfully calm even when I am supposed to be emotionally charged, when people cross the boundaries. But not today, not after hearing this.

'That's why you'd have to learn then. All the best Roy. This is an offer based on potential and trust; so congratulations'. With a brief nod in my direction, we shake hands and part.

A perfect storm!

I wake up to the sound of the alarm, loud and shrill next to my ear. Sighing, I get up. I look out through the glass window, and gaze for a few seconds at the stars in the sky. The alarm reads 4.30 a.m. It is time for my morning run. Our natural alarm clock is fast asleep in his cradle, today. He had turned five months just yesterday.

I have long since been trying to get into the habit of going for a run every morning, and of course with the excuses I make to stay in bed a bit longer, exercise seems to be the last thing on my list. Living just minutes' walk from the beach, I am at an advantage. Nevertheless, I have taken a while to get accustomed to waking up earlier again after the birth of our son. But today, I have no choice, and as I absorb the first moments of wakefulness, my thoughts enter a world of turmoil, turmoil that still flusters me in my sleep. How am I going to approach this new role? Why did I ask for more challenge? There is no one but me to blame.

I stealthily rush downstairs not wanting to wake my wife up. I skim through yesterday's papers while waiting for the water to boil for my coffee. An article in the bottom corner of the paper catches my eye. It isn't the contents of the article on reforms of a chain of companies in the country that interests me, but the salt and pepper haired man in the photo who looks achingly familiar. The article goes to say how this medical doctor (who had been practicing in the UK) turned Vice President of a chain of companies employing sixty-thousand people, has gone on to transform the business in a bottom-up approach, saving the organization from a massive bankruptcy in its core business units.

I continue to read more about this doctor and his team as I sip my coffee. Then it dawns on me who he is: the guy

who walks at lightning speed on the beach with a stick in his hand to chase off stray dogs who might occasionally cross his path. Ah! That's right! Never knew he is a medical doctor.

The article interests me particularly, because of the dilemma I have regarding my own work situation. I put the paper away, check my earphones and leave the house hoping the run will help me to get some clarity in my thinking.

I cross the rail tracks, and walk out onto the beach. I glance around for a few seconds, before plugging in my earphones and starting to jog in the direction of the Mount Lavinia Hotel. I jog to the beat pounding loudly in my ears. Each time I feel tired, I slow down to a brisk walk. In this manner, I reach the end of the beach strip, right next to the hotel. At this place, I pause for a while to look around. I take in the mild light of early dawn as the gentle breeze soothes my aching muscles, when I suddenly notice the familiar face from the papers walking by. 'Aha! I knew I've seen this guy before', I think to myself while appraising the tall, slender man who seems to be in his mid-to-late fifties; Oh well! It's difficult to guess.

I smile and nod a greeting, and he salutes me in response.

'That's an incredible story, to turn something around like that', I call out as he passes me heading back in the same direction.

'Ah! Yes. I like to stay away from the limelight. Don't enjoy it much you see', he says still walking.

'Yeah I know what you mean', I add wanting to join him in conversation.

'Boy, you've got to walk faster than that if we are going to chat,' he says laughingly. 'The old man needs his exercise'. He extends his hand and introduces himself, 'I am Edward, but you can call me Ed.'

'And I am Roy', I respond with a handshake.

'I hear you were a doctor before. That's interesting; doctor to a Vice President in the corporate world. You must be someone who loves change', I comment.

He smiles, 'Change is inevitable when you take the macro view. So, it's not about whether you like it or not; it's about whether you can take it or not'.

He grins and asks me about my family, and draws some reference to his wife who is from the area being friends with someone we know in common. He asks me about my wife, kids and work. When it comes to the topic of my work, I struggle to answer in confidence.

'I go as Head of Operations at the moment, but there's a bit of change that's taking place within the company; so I think my role will change in the days to come which makes everything uncertain at this stage', I reply hesitantly.

'And you are someone who hates change?' he asks, smiling knowingly.

I nod bashfully. 'Yeah somewhat, but it depends on the area; I am ok with machines and people who can fit into a system; you know, the things that can be planned and organized'.

‘You mean you like predictability and to be in control of a situation. Do you think the sense of control comes with the system in place?’ he asks.

‘Hmmm...you could say that’, I add. ‘It’s more about the touchy, feely stuff that I am uncomfortable with. That’s definitely not my area’, I smile.

‘Ah! I understand’, he says looking across the shore. ‘Look, I’ve got to stop here as that small shop across the railway lines has the meanest toast bread, dahl curry and sambol. You are welcome to join me if you like’, he offers invitingly.

I feel slightly disappointed as I remember that I have promised my team to meet them over breakfast at the factory an hour before work, which meant leaving to work early.

‘I’ll definitely join you next time but today I need to head to work pretty early. Maybe I can meet you Saturday morning?’, I ask, hoping he’d say yes.

‘Yeah, sure. But I don’t run like you. I walk. So if you are okay to walk, we can meet on Saturday’, he says with a wave of his hand as he heads towards the rail tracks.

‘I’ll walk with you sir’, I tell him, relieved that I’d get another chance to meet this guy.

For some reason, I feel a sense of hope as if this guy may have the answers I am looking for.

As I run back towards home, a good thirty minute run, I am surprised by my own openness with the guy. I rarely talk about work with anyone. Desperate, I am! I think. But hey! What a difference a day makes!

Back at work

During the week at work, I find out that the management would put a hold on the announcement of the new promotion, till I get my homework done on how to initiate this project. I am to present my plan to my boss next week.

My boss has told me that I should do this alone as the findings will be very sensitive. What I do not anticipate is the reluctance to cooperate from some of the crucial people from HR. This promotion where I would function as an independent party in an area that overlaps with that of HR, is being seen as unacceptable and downright insulting for some on the team, including some Senior Managers. I can really do without this drama but the gauntlet is thrown, and there is no going back.

I try to see who can really help me in this, who will be on my side. I put down flowcharts, and request some statistics from HR to be made available to me. On top of my current role that I still have to fulfill, I find myself overly absorbed in the how, what and why of the whole initiative. I like to believe that people would be on my side, that they would cooperate, collaborate and combine forces with me.

In my frustration, I reach out to speak to one of my good friends outside of work and he suggests how it looks like, that I am the pawn that the company would now manipulate to get the unpleasant work done, to spell out what they don’t want to, to fire the people they don’t have the courage to confront. Speaking to him does not help at all, and with the increasing amount of chores in the home front after the second baby, my stress and the lack of sensitivity towards household issues, is not really welcomed by my wife either.

The following week is a horror. I find myself thinking even in my sleep: putting models and processes together in order to plan it out,

keeping the repercussions in mind. I get disturbed by the impending deadlines occasionally.

I feel overly cautious and aware of the emotions slowly simmering around the factory. Despite claims of confidentiality, someone has (as always) leaked the secret. I find myself having to explain to people why this initiative is underway, justifying why it is I who will be driving this change. I receive countless text messages, emails from personal email addresses, and many perplexed looks from faces in the cafeteria. My conversations with peers become non-personal, overly technical, and almost fake. I become extremely sensitive to the passive-aggression around that is brewing somewhat strongly beneath the surface.

One morning, Naren, my colleague, whom I have been grooming to take on my position in Operations, approaches me in the cafeteria, and says 'Roy, I know this is hard for you. I know what people are thinking and how difficult it maybe for you to ignore it, but know that I am there to support you. Apart from making sure that everything in Operations flows smoothly, I can make time after work to support you in anything you need me to do'.

He further adds laughingly, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going'.

I smile, thank him, and ask him to oversee the Operations unit for the time being.

EYE FOR THY LIGHT

Back at home in the night, my wife often finds me awake whenever she wakes up to nurse the baby in the early hours of the morning, and then there are other times I pretend to be asleep. There are also instances when the need to get things off my chest is too strong, that I relate the happenings of the day and my plans on how I could approach this initiative. Most of the time, she looks at me nonplussed but listens patiently. She would always finish off the conversation with a reminder that I am prone to high cholesterol and blood pressure (as a result of generational garbage) during times of high stress. In one instance, she went on to suggest that maybe I should speak to a few friends from outside work or even get the help of a consultant who could assist me in planning it out.

The plus side of this insomnia is that I am able to get my exercise done. I remain sleepless in bed till 4.30 am, then have my coffee, and go on to run the whole length of the beach, which helps me clear my thoughts. It has been five days since my first chat with Ed, and as agreed I am waiting by the railway tracks, when I see Ed walking towards me, illuminating his path on the dark street with a flashlight.

'Good morning Ed!' I call out expectantly.

'A very good morning!' he replies as he switches off the torch.

Once again, I am struck by how energetic he is, a delightful trait to see. I envy his bursts of positive energy.

‘So you told me Roy, that there’s a lot of uncertainty in your job?’ asks Ed after casual chitchat about current politics in the country. I am cautious about who I divulge information to about my company.

‘Ah Ed, I have too many questions which I cannot put into words. In a nutshell, I’m trying to wrap my head around a new initiative the company wants me to lead in an area that I have very little idea of. I actually don’t know from where to start’, I respond, honestly confused about what to ask. ‘But to start with, maybe you can tell me what you think is the most important thing in the life of a professional?’, I ask, hoping that this general question would open up many discussion points.

‘Ah! You think I’m a guru!’, he laughs. ‘I’m not, Roy. I can only tell you what I’ve learnt in my life.’

He continues, ‘To answer your question, the most important thing in life is to see beyond the prison of our own thinking. Let me start with a story’.

‘Once, there were two criminals who were on a life-sentence in two adjacent cells, in one of the most notorious prisons. Everyday, one of the prisoners would relate stories about the happenings on the playground of a school that was next to this prison’, he narrates.

‘Through his small window, he would look and share stories about different children and the games they played. He would specify the actions of children in so much detail that he had stories that would fill in the first half of the day. Next to the school was a market-place, and during weekends, he would relate the happenings within each stall – from fresh produce, to the dairies’ and the butchers’, he continues.

‘Years went by, till one day, the stories all stopped. The prisoner had died late in the night, and his body had been removed before the other prisoner had a chance to pay his last respects. They had never seen each other given the strict rules that applied within the compound’, Ed pauses for a few moments.

He continues, ‘However, the other prisoner asked the guards whether he could have the cell of his friend, the one with a small window. The guard looked at him and exclaimed, “what window?” Ed stops and pauses.

“Well, the window through which the other prisoner would look into the outside world to narrate stories about the children in the playground and the market place”, he responded. Then the guard replied, “Ah! That would not have been possible even if he had a window”.

Ed stops again and looks at the horizon. ‘The guard added, “Not only was the cell completely sealed but he was also completely blind”.

I feel the goosebumps rise on my skin. ‘Wow’ I utter.

We walk for a while in silence.

‘The real sight is “insight”. With our eyes intact, we could still be blind’. Ed completes the story.