

# Respect and Trust are Inspired, Not Inherited

**Jeroninio Almeida** stresses on the importance of grassroots wisdom that even modern education cannot impart

**O**ver the years, I have been engaging with several CEOs and CXOs who request me to coach or consult with them. A few years ago, I engaged with a young business leader as his consultant and coach. This young MD and CEO (let's call him Gaurav for reasons of confidentiality and my ethical code as a life and executive coach) had inherited the huge family business from his father who had passed away in 2007. I knew Gaurav's father (a first generation entrepreneur who had built the business from scratch) who had contributed large sums to social causes, through the joy of giving movement, which I had conceptualised and created in 2003.

### When a Young Turk takes on

When I first engaged with Gaurav, the nature of my role as a consultant was to help him with the creation of a brand new strategy and vision for the new entity. Gaurav had decided to move away from being a family business into a truly Indian multinational.

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The idea was grandiose and there was huge excitement in the young leadership team that was handpicked and recruited by Gaurav to take the company to the next level and into a new era. The energy of the young team was palpable and yet I found something missing as most of the old timers who had helped Gaurav's father build up his business, were feeling left out and neglected.

In my quest for creating a holistic vision and strategy that everyone owned and committed to execute, I would engage informally with several people across hierarchies to understand their thoughts and insight. During these conversations I had developed deep mutual trust and respect with all the people working in this organisation. People spoke candidly with me and although they all like Gaurav, they had apprehensions about his new ideas and growth plan, which seemed a little too hurried and abrupt. The vision was not yet owned and accepted by all these wonderful people who had put in their sweat, blood and toil to support Gaurav's father build up this huge empire.

### Never ignore the old-timers

During my conversations I also learnt that most of these well meaning people had seen Gaurav grow up as a kid and were thus very fond of him. However, a lot of people also felt that he was autocratic and that he had not really earned the position, which he had inherited much before time, purely due to the untimely demise of his father. I was also told that there were a whole lot of intricacies about the business, which Gaurav and his



young leadership team had a lot to learn about. In my interactions with all these veterans of this huge empire, I understood that this was true and that Gaurav needed to include these set of people and get them to work along with his young leadership team. It was apparent that although the young leadership team had the business process intelligence having learned their MBA skills in Ivy League institutes, they were seriously lacking with the grassroots wisdom that was essential to make the right decisions and not head towards a complete derailment.

Over time Gaurav and I had become good friends and even though I was to purely focus on creating a strategy and vision that the group would then adopt and implement, I felt it was my moral responsibility to make Gaurav aware and conscious of where he may be going wrong. One morning Gaurav called me and asked me to have breakfast with him. He was very excited about the launch readiness of a new retail venture that the group had decided to embark upon as a part of their forward integration process and wanted me to discuss the details with him before he presented

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it to people at his office. We met at 7 am for breakfast at the Le Meridian Hotel near Janpath and discussed the intricacies. I pointed out to him that after discussing with several people within and outside, I strongly thought and felt that we should not launch our own stores and first test the market by placing our products in large format stores and mitigate our risk, while we learn the ropes. While he agreed with the idea, he did not decide to do this and still wanted to go ahead with his own retail stores. He told me that the team had done a complete feasibility

and we were good to go.

## **Respect isn’t inherited**

I let it be for the time being, concluded our breakfast and went with Gaurav to his office complex at Janpath. This was the first time I was entering the office with him and I experienced a Mexican wave where everyone on this office floor, including the veterans stood up as Gaurav walked in. After we entered his business suite, I plonked into the La-Z-Boy chair in Gaurav’s office and said “phew that was overwhelming and embarrassing”. Gaurav asked me what it was. I said to him I felt embarrassed watching all those people rise up when we walked in. Gaurav said to me that this was a mark of respect for his presence. I said to Gaurav, are you sure? Gaurav asked me what do you mean by are you sure?

I told him, that respect is not about people standing up. Gaurav said to me they did that for his father and now they do it for him. I told him: “Gaurav, your father earned and inspired the respect and trust, while you just inherited it.” I told him there were people there in that group who have seen him



grow up and that they do not need to respect him or me by standing up as we need to respect them for their age and loyalty to the organisation and his father. After a patient hearing, Gaurav said if I knew where he was heading. "Do you think I am doing something wrong?" he asked. I told Gaurav it was not about doing wrong but it was about doing what is right to inspire that respect and trust.

Gaurav then pulled his chair closer to me and requested me to speak my mind and help him change things for the better. I told Gaurav that he was a great guy and with a lot of potential to take this organisation to the next level and make it a truly Indian multinational. At the same time I made him aware that he has already begun the process and are doing a great job. He has his team are brilliant and have huge intelligence. I also made known to him that modern education makes us intelligent but does not give us the wisdom and commonsense. It is time we engaged all your old veterans and rather than telling them what to do, let us ask them for ideas about how we can execute and implement our plans better.

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### **Trust and respect are essence of a relationship**

I told him two things: That, relationships, are built on two things: Respect and trust. Both elements have to be there. And it has to be mutual. You can have respect for someone, but if you don't have trust, the relationship will crumble and never endure the test of time. These people are so wise and we have just disengaged with them since we are so focused on bringing in new people and creating a whole new culture. However let us not destroy the old culture of trust and respect which all these good people shared with your father. I told him if there is a disconnect between the old and the new because of lack of relationships based on trust and respect, and then we shall have more games being played by people and less of work and execution.

Gaurav then told me that he understood what I was trying to tell him and asked me for suggestions to set things right. I then suggested that we take all the people in the leadership team and the old veterans for a strategy meet offsite and let us set a few things right. We planned the offsite and in the offsite Gaurav told everyone that from now on he wanted a youthful positive culture and that he would not like anyone to stand up when he walked in. He also asked people for their ideas to improve the culture and genuinely listened to their ideas. He then presented his strategy to everyone and

asked them to give their thoughts. The veterans told us that they felt a lot of things should be tested even though the feasibility study showed promise. Gaurav genuinely listened and agreed that there was merit in what they were saying and we all decided to work together as ONE team where we would celebrate our differences and opinions. Gaurav also agreed that we would roll out the retail venture after testing the markets and learning by first showcasing our products in large format store.

After one year of this offsite engagement, Gaurav invited me for dinner and told me things were much more positive and that he had gained more respect and trust even with the veterans. I shared that I was aware of this as I have been speaking with them regularly and that they have no anxieties about Gaurav anymore. In this one year we had also seen some retail stores that ran too fast and crashed and closed shop. Gaurav and his team only launched their retail brand after three years of testing the market and their stores are performing extremely well and are now adopting the franchise model. The group businesses are all performing well and they have become a truly Indian MNC. There is a culture of camaraderie now and the young leaders and veterans share a huge rapport and trust for working together to achieve growth and success. There is a positive culture in the organisation and people do not stand up when Gaurav walks in anymore but truly feel the respect and trust for this young leader who inspired their trust and respect and will do whatever it takes to ensure that Gaurav's vision become bigger and better. ■



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