

Value Bearing Principle

A story of Shishir Joshipura
MD, SKF India Ltd., India

I had the honour to document the story of a Mechanical Engineer who heads the Indian arm of a multinational company. His upbringing; his professional life—first with steam production equipment, then with mechanical bearings and seals; and finally his stand for values; made me realise what a wonderful case study we have. When thinking of a title for this story, I wanted to include aspects of steam, bearings and values, all of which has shaped the story of this fine gentleman, but settled with playing with just three words. May I introduce you to the Managing Director of SKF Ltd., Shishir Joshipura.

In the Beginning

Shishir Joshipura grew up as the only child in his family in the North Indian state of Rajasthan. His mother was a teacher and his father—who at 16 years was amongst the youngest cricketer to play in the Ranji Trophy circuit—worked in the private sector. His distinct recollection of his childhood days centred on the abundant care and love he found, his early tryst with independence and the strong values his life was founded on.

Since both parents were working, Shishir was exposed to being relatively independent quite early in his life. He had to travel to school on his own, learn how to handle money, heat his own food and remain home till his parents returned. These responsibilities enabled him to take decisions independently and be accountable for them. It also helped lay an important foundation in his life.

Recounting a near-death situation in his schoolboy days, Shishir shared of how in violation of ground rules set by his parents, he went to the terrace of his building to join his friends fly paper kites. It was a temptation he could not resist. Sadly, he lost his footing and tumbled over the low railing, falling two storeys down. Fortunately for him his shorts got caught in a steel rod at the construction site below. That broke his fall, leaving him shaken and bruised but largely unhurt.

Shishir hadn't realised how much love and care he received until the next morning when his mother asked him to come to her school once his classes were over. Reluctantly he went over and was startled to see his mother take him in her arms and burst into tears. He understood much later why she was overwhelmed with so much emotion. The doctors had spoken to his parents



Corporate Office

of a 24-hour wait-and-watch period after the near-fatal fall. This period had now come to an end with no signs of internal injury or odd behaviour.

Materialistically, the small family were not very well off but it did not stop Shishir from a happy childhood. His father and he shared a cycle. On some days his father used the cycle to work while Shishir would go to school with his friend. On other days he would take the cycle to school and his father would walk to work.

After high school, the young lad decided to pursue Mechanical Engineering at the reputed Birla Institute of Technology and Science, better known by its acronym, BITS Pillani. At the end of his graduation year, he attended a campus interview. He was offered a job in what every graduating engineer at that time called the 'dream company'; and another from a much smaller company at that time, Thermax Ltd. He chose the latter for fear that he would get lost in the bigger company and felt he would fit in well with Thermax. He never regretted his decision and enjoyed working with the company for 26 years. Shishir also completed Advanced Management Program from the prestigious Harvard Business School. He now openly confesses that his years at this engineering goods company are what shaped him to what he is professionally.

Working the Way Up

Shishir joined Thermax Ltd., Pune as a Trainee Engineer. His initial role was in the field of installation and commissioning of boilers and systems. The young Joshipura did this for two years. He then switched to sales. I couldn't help notice the excitement of this happy man as he recounted with fond reminiscence how people-oriented, entrepreneurship-oriented and experimentation-oriented his company was under the leadership of R D Aga, Abhay Nalawade and then Mrs. Anu Aga and Prakash Kulkarni. He recollected how the company gave a lot of room to experiment and make decisions. "They did not pull you up for failures but expected one to learn from failures," said Shishir who then became Regional Head of Thermax Ltd.

Soon he was asked to head a joint-venture which was a services company "Thermax is a product and project company, so this was an unusual JV. However after a short period of three years, resurrecting the company from a negative net worth situation, I returned to the parent company to head the process heat division (steam boilers business)" Like most engineers, Shishir listed his

early years and professional growth almost chronologically.

“I had this streak to start something new. I was passionate about energy efficiency and carbon footprint. Thermax agreed to start a company that enabled carbon footprint reduction through alternate energy route. We also started a company that decided to sell steam and not just steam boilers. Our market was export-oriented and the consumers were located in the US, South America, Europe, South East Asia, etc. It was a very exciting journey. It helped me expand my scope, thinking and knowledge. What I also learnt during this time was the importance of being a good human being. It is so easy to get carried away with setting up new businesses; having a focus on numbers and such related aspects that one forgets the need to be sensitive.”

The Test

Thermax was undergoing change as an organisation. On one occasion the then Chairperson posed a big game-changing question to a group of senior managers: What will happen to our business if we agree to do everything by strictest standards of ethics and say no to any transaction that does not pass this test? “As engineers, all of us took out our calculators and were trying to answer her question with numbers. Unknown by many of us, she had actually posed a question that would change the whole ethos of the company. It would change the entire way the company worked.” I soon had an opportunity to put the theory to practice.

“At that time we were negotiating a very large contract with a multi-national that was setting up operations in India. The contract with them was crucial to achieving the year-end target for my team. An Expat gentleman was heading the customer organisation at that time. The equipment that Thermax makes undergoes several inspections from government agencies—from manufacture, installation and running at site.”

“A lot of our equipment was manufactured in one state and shipped to another for installation and commissioning. At each stage there were mandatory government inspections. The equipment could not be

started without having the proper approvals. Many of the laws that government agencies were relying on were archaic, written in the 1800s and open to various interpretations. This then goes into ambiguous space and the situation is ripe for wrongful demands. So the customer is at the mercy of the inspectors for approvals.”

“Thermax agreed to take care of all that was required in the technical and professional aspects of the contract with this multi-national company. However I told the Expat project head categorically that we would not take on the responsibility of managing the inspections in the state of installation. He was firm in saying that we could get the contract only if we took care of 'all' aspects. We both slept over the stalemate and when we met the next morning, I responded to his, 'So, what have you decided?' by telling him that our position was unchanged. He gave me a short speech about how I was not being reasonable and that being a large global corporation this contract will open doors for our business with various countries.

“What will happen to our business if we agree to do everything by strictest standards of ethics and say no to any transaction that does not pass this test?”

“I did not bite the bait. I stood my ground. He said that I was compelling him to award the contract to somebody else because of a 'trivial'

issue. I said that it would be a shame if because of this; his company would lose out on having the best. We shook hands with pleasantries and I left his office with my colleague.”

“It was a long walk to the gate and my colleague wondered aloud if we had made the right decision. He reminded me of how large a contract we lost and its repercussions on the target. What he said was true but I also knew that ethical business transaction was the expectation of our Chairperson, and we had the responsibility to deliver it. Before we reached the gate however, we were called back to meet the Expat manager. As we approached near he said with a big affectionate smile that the contract was ours and he was only testing our values and resolve. In those days, long before the advent of computers, when word-processing was done with a typewriter, he showed me the contract that was already typed and ready.”

“This was for me a huge learning. It taught me that there was merit in standing for what is right even at the risk of

losing in short term.”

I asked Shishir, “What was going on through your mind at that time? What were your thoughts? Were you afraid?”

The respected Engineer responded in a matter-of-fact manner, “If I had started out on the basis of fear then I would have begun a journey of compromises. If my aim was to minimize fear, I would have continued compromising at each step to bring fear to a 'zero level'. However I kept reminding myself of what my Chairperson had said because I looked up to her for inspiration. I knew that if the owner of the company had asked us this question—'What would happen if we did not compromise on values?'—it wasn't just a rash thought. I had trust that there will be benefit and value in that path. I also considered that the only way to make this a reality would be by changing my behaviour. So in this case too, conviction gave rise to courage to stand up for what is right.

“I would be lying if I said that I was not concerned. If we had not got the contract, I would not have achieved my targets. I knew that I was facing a situation of failure and alternatives were almost impossible to find. However, given the open and fair environment in Thermax I did not fear any reprimand or negative repercussions.”

The Big Leap

After heading a division in a medium-sized business firm and working in it for 26 years, Shishir then got an opportunity in 2009 to head operations of a multi-national company in India. This was a big leap.

“I knew that if at all I was to make a change, this was the time. I would never have worked for a competitor, though the offers were many. That was my principle. So I took the plunge to work in this multi-national company manufacturing what I had no prior knowledge of—bearings and seals. This is how my stint in SKF Ltd. as Managing Director began. It was exciting as everything was new. I had to learn everything about this company from scratch.”

SKF is a Swedish company that is over 100 years old so it had already overcome some of the battles that Shishir was to face in the Indian arm of the company. The company was already established in its purposes. Its positional leadership and its brand only added to its strength. But as companies are made of people there were challenges that the new MD, who was brought in to bring change and freshness in approach, had to face. The



situations were different in nature and complexity from those he faced in Thermax.

A People Approach

I now asked Shishir to share some examples of the challenges he had faced in his career and what he did to overcome those hurdles. To this, the young MD highlighted how caring SKF is as a company and how it is always concerned for its employees.

“I have come from a school of thought that we must care for our people first. Employees are an important part of a company's growth and future. It is therefore important to ensure that they are looked after well. When I took over as Managing Director, we rewrote several aspects of the employee policy to make employee care a reality in line with SKF's core principle.

“The need to minimize late-work schedules was reviewed. Female employees, in the eventual odd day that required her to stay after 7:00 pm would request one male employee of her choice to remain with her in the office until she finished work. He would then escort her to her house in a company-hired car before going home himself.”

“Maternity leave would earlier be granted for two months. Then it was leave without pay. I knew that it was periods like this that mothers needed the extra money and so we revised that policy too. All female employees now receive a one-year fully paid maternity leave. There is also a crèche for mothers returning after leave and a host of such beneficial policies.”

The Thinking Out-of-the-box Alternative

To the question of how he deals with performance pressures, SKF India's top man answered that it was only fair that shareholders and the Board of Directors expect the company to perform well. “It is my responsibility as head of the company to lead the team to perform. What I



have observed is that in the face of challenges, when we are honest, people rally to deliver their best once they are aligned to the goal. It is my experience that when we explain our situation, people are not unreasonable. It is only when we create an unreal expectation or hide facts that we invite trouble.”

Citing a recent example of one of the company's best factory that was largely dependent on one customer, Shishir shared how the plant was thrown into a crisis when the customer contract was lost. The never-say-die MD met with this factory's team and said, “Guys, one option is that we resign to our fate. Another option is that we cut operating costs by doing what many businesses do—send some staff home and undertake several cost-saving measures. However there is a third alternative. Let us think out of the box and approach the customer to find a way to meet their expectations, and win the business back.

“While alternative number three was a long term solution the team found a fourth alternative. Since many engineers and managers on the team had little work they offered to move into the field and engage in dialogue with organisations who we were not serving. This team proposed to find new solutions to serve this unserved market. They set up an aggressive 90 day plan and the other half decided to focus on innovative ways to cut costs from the operations. As news of the factory's situation and the employee resolve became known other business heads that were not directly connected with the unit came forward to offer assistance in different ways. We knew that we will overcome the situation even as short term solutions looked attractive.”

“Short-term solutions are tempting but if we think creatively and put customer at the centre of innovation then we can create a sustainable value. The teams persevered for over 12 months and delivered on the plan and now the factory is the best example of turnaround

from near death. Yes, sometimes it means going through a tight phase for a brief period and one needs a firm resolve to stay the course.”

“And where does this conviction come from? It comes from this fact that when circumstances change a different approach is required and not doing anything is a certain path to failure. How does this reflect with the Board of Directors and shareholders? We were fortunate to have full backing from Board and Global management as they saw a spark in the team and a clear path to recovery. We were open and honest about our situation and sought their suggestions which we incorporated in our plan. Honesty has a strange way of attracting understanding and co-operation.”

“I see two things come through,” this writer observed to the man he was now beginning to admire: “One, the firm resolve to stay true in doing what is right and two, look for creative ways to grow and expand. Is this the recipe for sustainable growth?” To this the MD with several experiential stories narrated yet another recent situation.

Looking for Posterity

Shishir related how there was a segment in his team that he found very difficult to convince to think differently. They were from the old-school of thought and were in the company longer than he was. They kept basing many of their strategies on the past. He could see that this approach would create problems in the growth story of the company. So he sat with them and shared with them an approach that focussed on the future rather than on history. However the MD could see their scepticism and reluctance to tread a different path.

The Engineer who was brought in by SKF to bring change then said to this small team, “Thirty years down the line I would like to tell my grandchildren how some decisions you made has affected the growth story of the



India Distribution Centre, Chakan

company. I know that you too would like to have such a story to tell your own grandchildren.”

“It was at this point that the penny dropped. They said to me that they would like to rethink their plans but that it could not be done at this meeting. I agreed and asked them when they would be ready. They told me that they would be ready by the morning.”

“Now there were many in this team who zealously guard their personal time. This culture is slowly changing but the reason I mention this is because this team sat through the night and worked till we hours of morning and came up with a plan that was even better than the one I had proposed to them. They laid out a plan that offered a growth story that was worth boasting of to their grandchildren years later.”

So how does one change a diverse set of people to consider plans that can affect the future? To this Shishir remarked, “Leadership is all about providing direction, helping them realise their potential and staying true to what is right. If this is done in an open and transparent manner the teams will surprise you every time with their creativity and thinking.”

Seeking Honest Voices

“We all have moments when we can look back and say that we could have done things differently. Would there be any such stories,” this writer asked Shishir Joshipura.

“Several,” replied the honest business leader. “I can think of numerous times when I have made a bad decision.”

He then recounted a time when as a senior manager in Thermax, he persuaded his company to invest in a JV project in South East Asia. It was a brilliant plan and was oozing with freshness.

“I was convinced that it would work there. However what I did not realise was that unlike in India, the capability of company was different in SE Asia and JV partner's value system match would be a critical success factor. The JV never took off and I have not been able to pardon myself for rushing the top management into the situation. I always look back with regret at that decision I made but I also learnt something that day. I learnt the importance of taking advice from others.”

“Since I was a senior manager, not many within the company would share thoughts that were different from

“When we are honest, people rally to deliver their best once they are aligned to the goal.”

mine. But if I had sought for honest voices from both outside and within the company, they would have highlighted drawbacks in my plan. The problem was that I did not seek those honest voices.”

“I know that I will never repeat such a mistake again. Today, I realise that it is always advantageous to have a team of individuals who think differently. The team I now head at SKF has members whose views are diametrically opposite to mine. We are like chalk and cheese. Each one of us is so different. But we all bring diverse qualities to the table. This enables us to make better decisions for the company.”

“Another thing is that I have no problem in admitting and working with people who say, 'I don't know.' My past failure helped me realise that I don't know everything. It is from this attitude of honesty that there is safety. I do however have a problem in dealing with people who don't want to know.”

Changing Mind-sets

Describing another example of failure, Shishir shared of when he first joined SKF Ltd. The multi-national's Indian operation consists of six factories spread over the North, West and South of India. They have recently started a solutions factory in the East. The nature of operations covers manufacture and service of bearings, seals, lubricants and mechatronics. In India, the group turnover is about Rs.3000 crores (30 billion).

“When I joined the company, I knew that I was brought in to bring new ideas and fresh thinking to the company. 'I am here to bring change,' was my mind-set. As I said before, I came from background where no one ever said no to a business opportunity. Thermax was a company that took challenges head-on. They never gave up. Even when sales teams lost orders they would go back to the customer to convince them as to why they should reconsider their decision. Many times they won back a customer. At Thermax the mind-set was that we must make it happen.”

“So when I came to SKF the environment and operating premises were very different. A lot more process orientation but less experimentation, acting with certainty but not outside the box, follow the structure but not be entrepreneurial, be certain but not speedy on

decision making- it was a different world and I understood the challenge when I launched an

ambitious growth plan which everyone said yes to but no one bought. The result was a foregone conclusion- the plan failed. “I wondered if the plan was too ambitious. I did a deep introspection and spoke with several of my colleagues to seek their input on what went wrong and what could I have done differently to make the plan succeed. I quickly learned that we needed a “our plan” as opposed to “my plan”.

Next time when I called together a group of senior managers I changed the total approach. I first presented to them the state of the company, market and opportunity. I then posed five questions and sought their answers. The questions related to dimensions of business growth, people, leadership, competitiveness and such related aspects. I did not know what answers would turn out but I was willing to wait and find out.”

“The sought some time to revert and we made available the top management members as sounding boards to them. That evening we had a dinner planned and to our surprise not a single member from any of the teams turned up. We enquired only to be told “We are still working on the answers and would eat later- and we will ask for help if required”. This is very unlike the culture of the company where everyone is used to being on time for everything.”

“The next morning the teams asked for some more time and when they later made their presentations, I was surprised at the plans they came up with. On approval of the plan, I noticed that within a short span of time, they had begun circulating instructions and messages to their respective junior team members. Without any push from the top managerial team, communication and decisions were being effected. They had already begun refining strategies to a third-level plan.”

“I realised that the difference between my failed plan and



Factory at Mysore

the new plan was ownership. Then, I had imposed my plan to them with the instruction that they make it happen. Now they took ownership and responsibility for their ideas and were eager to make it succeed. 'My plan' had given way to 'Our plan'.”

Business versus Stake-holders

“I come from a school of thought that believes in sustainable business practices are not only good but are inexpensive when executed well. Let me give you an example. We have for some time been deliberating about our responsibility vis-à-vis the environment. One dimension is on the products that we make and the processes we follow. Another dimension is the energy we consume in our operations.”

“We reflected on what could be done to reduce our impact on the environment. Our team came with the idea of putting roof top solar plant across our manufacturing locations. Though in India, SKF is an independent company, worldwide, we are part of a global system. SKF took a decision globally that only capital expenses which are 'must-do' should be considered and not those which are 'good-to-do'. This meant that we could not use our own resources to set up a solar plant. I encouraged my team members not to resign themselves to failure and see this as just another hurdle to overcome. In this case the hurdle was that we could not use our own money.”

“Sometime during this period, I was sitting with one of my network colleagues and he was sharing his joining a new start-up enterprise. He further shared that they were looking for a customer to set-up a solar power plant on BOO basis. His enterprise would do everything—select the technology, put up the infrastructure, finance it and sell the electricity! His only expectation was that the customer should be reliable and ready to sign a long-term agreement. Thee start up did not have too much



Factory at Pune

capital to invest and was looking at setting up initially only a 100KW plant. My friend wondered if there was some reliable company I could suggest!”

“We were just building our new corporate office at that time and so I suggested that he consider setting up his plant there. Within three months he completed the roof top plant. Our contract was that we would not pay more than what we were paying for power purchased from the grid. The eventual result is that we are paying less than what we would have if we bought power from conventional source and helping the cause of the planet. Providence conspires to help you if you begin with the right intent.”

“In another project that was initiated within our company, I spoke with my business excellence head and asked if we could find a way to cut down our energy costs in a sustainable way. As a way of measuring effectiveness I suggested a target of saving Rs.50 million

in our factories, pan-India. Though he was at first sceptical, he was fully supportive and agreed to look at ways this target could be achieved. Given our own context of manufacturing, I discussed possible areas where energy savings could be looked at. My colleague set up 'SUSTEn' (an acronym for sustainable energy) and enrolled enthusiastic employees.

“By the end of year one, we ended up saving Rs.70 million. We were awarded by WWF the climate saver award, a very rare achievement for any project in first year of inception. This feat created a movement. It led to war on waste. This was followed by a project to reduce 'cost of poor quality'. SUSTEn has now become contagious. So to me sustainability is not just about showcase projects. It's not so much about technology. It is about thinking right and having a will to do it. If you can create a buy into the cause, anything becomes achievable,” the can-do-man from SKF tapered off



before adding how they further took initiatives to yet another level.

“The company later took this initiative to our suppliers. We were keen to have them become like us in the matter of energy saving and cost reduction. We were happy to engage in several interventions and even invest money with their cost-saving projects and other ventures involving people-development and process-development.”

“We have a very interesting supplier. He has 40 family members all of whom are in the business. At each of their factories we provided them with help, training and expertise and asked that they execute steps to help save on wasteful expenditure. They came up with a saving of Rs.50 lakhs (5 million) per year. However this achievement still did not buy in their enthusiasm. After reflecting on what I could do to get them motivated, I spoke to the young boys in their business and told them that if they focused on saving methods, after every year, each of them could buy a Mercedes Benz. They wondered how. I made them understand that with the

amount they saved each year, it was possible to get the car of every young man's dream!

Beyond the Professional

Shishir Joshipura stays at Pune with his parents, his wife. Their only daughter is presently working in US after finishing her post-graduation in Computer Engineering. While he confesses that he is not able to give time to the family by way of quantity, he ensures that the time he spends with them is high on quality. He almost never brings his work home. Without fail he takes his family on an annual week-long vacation and makes sure that it is completely free from work.

The voracious reader is clear on his philosophy. “If one lives with values all of the time, through thick and thin, then the end result is a positive gain. Values are not situational. We need to stick with them under all circumstances. It is this that will help us grow, both as a human being and as a professional.” ■

Written by Charles Fernandes, India



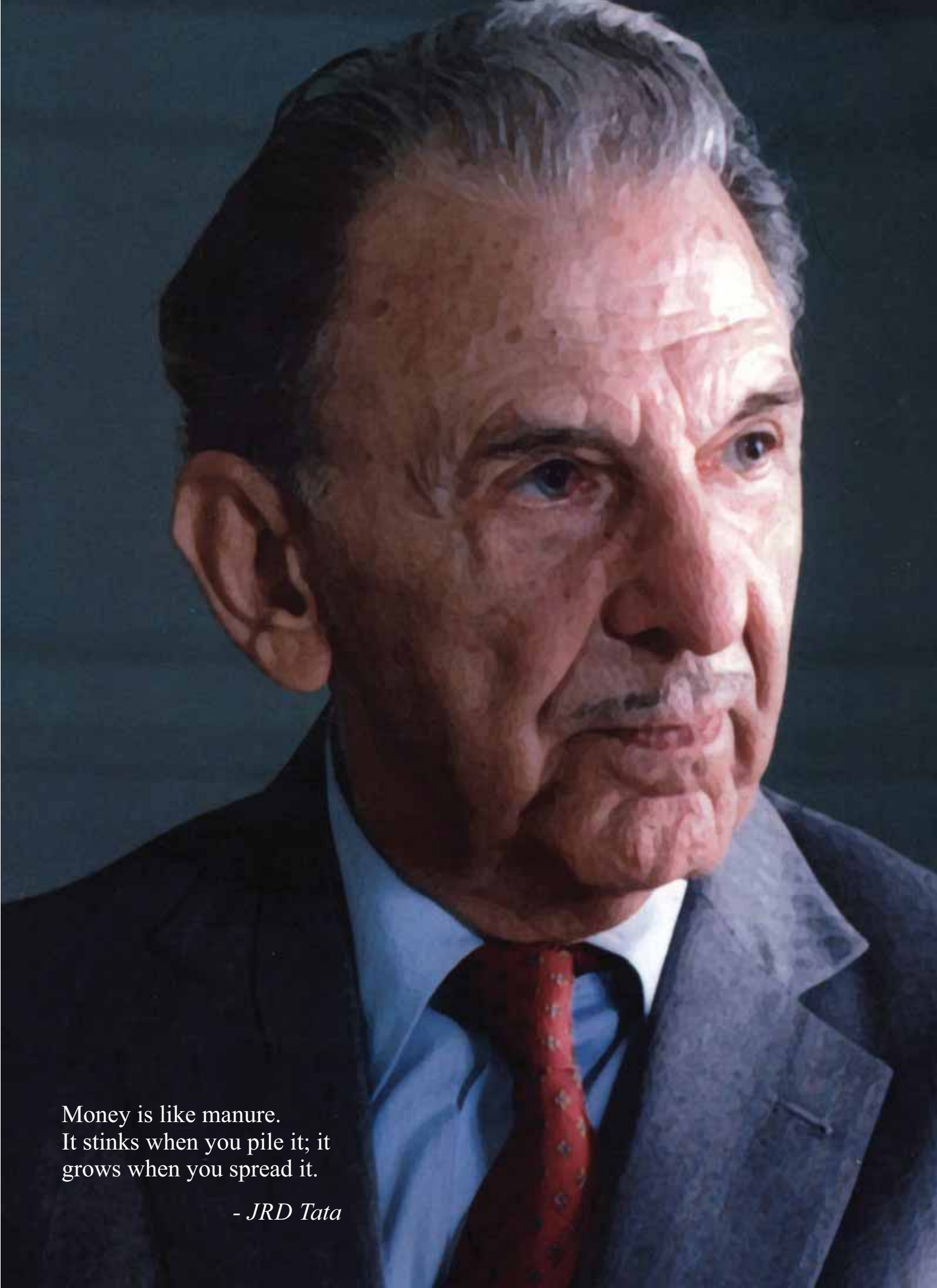
Patagonia

Patagonia is a high-performance, outdoor clothing and gear producer headquartered in Ventura, California operating under the mission: “Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.” Despite numerous lucrative offers to sell the business, Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard has maintained sole ownership of the company, which allows him to preserve Patagonia's legacy of solid profitability and contribution to a healthy natural world, and human community.

The company, which currently sees revenues in the \$250-300 million range, has implemented a number of sustainable business innovations, including a product-of-service take-back system for worn-out Capilene® garments. When Patagonia became one of the first major cotton garment producers to switch to 100% organically grown cotton, they saw sales of these garments jump 25%. In 2006, Patagonia began to treat its wool products in a patented slow-wash process that eliminates the use of chlorine (a toxin) and replaces the use of silver (a heavy metal pollutant) for anti-microbial odor control with crushed crab and shrimp shells, while maintaining the same product performance quality.

Other progressive actions by Patagonia include on-site employee day care centers, the elimination of private offices to encourage communication and collaboration, and a shipping and distribution center in Reno, Nevada which uses 1/3 less energy than its conventional counterparts due to efficient design.





Money is like manure.
It stinks when you pile it; it
grows when you spread it.

- JRD Tata

Lessons from Experience

You have to manage yourself before trying to manage other people or large enterprises—manage your physical self, your mental self and your happiness. This message is elementary, but the most easily forgotten among corporate executives. I learnt this valuable lesson in many memorable ways.

At age nine, I was among the tennis trainees at former Davis Cup player Dilip Bose's coaching scheme at the South Club, Calcutta. We were eager to hit the ball and start playing. He would make us perform fitness exercises for such an extended period of time that we would feel too tired to play. 'If you have only one car to use all your life, you would take the greatest care of it, wouldn't you? Your body is the only car you will have. Learn to take care of it,' he would repeatedly drill into us.

After seven years of service in Hindustan Lever, I became conscious of office politics, though I had no personal experience of it. A distributor at Pune was reported to have black-marketed the company's product, Dalda, at a time when the product was in short supply. I was deputed to investigate and report. I was advised by some experienced company colleagues that it would be a delicate task as I would have to balance between the National Sales Chief (who was thought to favour the distributor) and the Director (who was perceived to dislike the distributor). As I delved into the subject, I found it to be sufficiently complicated by itself. The thought that I had to align my report to handle the so-called sensitivity between the National Sales

Chief and the Director did not make sense to me. My middle-class training told me to ignore the politics, if any, and to do my job. And that is exactly what I did, though not without huge pangs of psychological anxiety. Perhaps I was lucky—it all worked out. In fact my objective report was applauded and I received recognition soon after that.

After three decades at Hindustan Lever, I was explicitly told that I was in a two-horse race to become CEO of the company. Of course, I thought my credentials were superior. After several months, the Unilever director in charge told me ever so sensitively that the company had selected the other person. He did so at the beginning of a Unilever conference at the seaside resort of Cartagena, Colombia. I was crushed; I could not enjoy Colombia. I had never missed a promotion compared to my peers in thirty years. I was disappointed, but not devastated. My happiness got disrupted, but only temporarily.

As my tennis coach had told me, you have not lost till the last point is over. I had learnt early that the key to your happiness must always remain in your hands, and never with anyone but you. In due course, I had four job offers to choose from. I retired early from Hindustan Lever to start on what turned out to be a wonderful second career with Tata with a fabulous set of challenges and a great team of professionals to work with.

Another lesson I learnt was that nobody imparts knowledge of soft subjects like humility, empathy and ambition. If you do not prepare your mind to learn these

If you have only one car to use all your life, you would take the greatest care of it, wouldn't you? Your body is the only car you will have. Learn to take care of it.

from commonplace experiences, then you alone will suffer the consequences. I have seen so many senior level managers suffer these.

When senior salesman, R. S. Kelkar, travelled with me in the Nashik territory to train me in marketing management and sales techniques, he told me that I should learn about human management. One evening he took me to the Rama temple at Nashik. He asked me whether I knew why the entrance at many temples was so low that one had to bend to enter. He went on to explain that the message was a reminder to always *namratha dhar* (be humble).

It is human to be ambitious. But how do you know that your ambition has run ahead of your competence? You are never sure. After five years of corporate service in the IT department, when I wanted to move into marketing, my bosses insisted that I retrain at the grassroots level in sales tasks. I was offended at having to take up this job. My boss advised me to deserve before I desired!

On another occasion I argued with my boss that I should be promoted. He simply said that I would be ready to be promoted when I knew more about the subject I was handling than any other person. Was I ready to demonstrate that I was ready? Considerably chastened, I withdrew and awaited my turn.

In later years, I was travelling in Ludhiana with N. Sud, a senior salesman. After a morning session in the markets, I informed him that his work was not good enough. He politely requested me to demonstrate 'better' in the market that afternoon. I was angry and humiliated, but also challenged. Fortunately, the

company training had included personally doing market work. I did what I had to but obviously not with the panache of Sud's experience. The insight taught me that no boss can expect work from a subordinate if he/she cannot empathise. The boss must experience the pangs of frustration or ecstasy that the subordinate experiences day in and day out before passing judgment summarily.

It is also good to keep a sense of humour and not take yourself too seriously. I was doing an intensive market check on the effectiveness of the sales story communicated for a high powered detergent called OMO. The intended communication was that even if you tied your clothes in a knot, the detergent was strong enough to penetrate the knot and clean the fabric. Imagine my chagrin when the communication played back to me was that the detergent would be effective only if the consumer first tied the clothes into knots before soaking in the detergent!

Through the years, I have found that many corporate conferences and discussions relate to mentoring by seniors. Huge communication and training effort goes into training seniors to be mentors. Nobody tells the mentee that he or she should want to be mentored. Such mental preparation helps a mentee to learn from the advice which falls all around any person like gentle raindrops. ■

The above is an extract from the book, "A Comma in a Sentence" written by R. Gopalakrishnan and published in RAINLIGHT by Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

Another lesson I learnt was that nobody imparts knowledge of soft subjects like humility, empathy and ambition. If you do not prepare your mind to learn these from commonplace experiences, then you alone will suffer the consequences.