

A leader has to be courageous

That a leader has to be very courageous is something I discovered many years back. In the role of leading organizations, courage is critical especially in times of crisis.

Some twenty five years back, I was Product Manager in a company manufacturing perishable industrial and consumer product. Our markets were mainly in the north and western parts of India and we had to work with a great disadvantage of a manufacturing plant in the south and exceedingly high packaging and transportation cost. With intense price wars already on to destroy each other, we were aghast to learn of new competition with a plant coming up in west-our main market.

We had to redefine our corporate strategies to counter increased competition. Gaining intricate knowledge and assessment of the timing of entry of new competition in the market, was critical. The memory of that spying visit is still fresh in mind.

I reached the industrial area of the city in south Maharashtra, where the plant was coming up on a bright morning, armoured with a pocket camera. I sat down at the small tea stall opposite to my new competitor's plant and gathered information by probing the tea stall owner and listening to the workers of the plant. I took photographs of the plant, major equipments from various positions and walked around the plant, to get a glimpse of the activities. With the help of all this, I had got a fair idea of the equipments and their installation progress. I also saw the civil works under progress. With the help of this, I estimated that trial run of the plant could take four months more and commercial launch of the product after stabilizing quality was likely in the next six months.

I always worked in companies, with a deep sense of belonging and strong commitment. In the process, I had not even once, thought about the personal risks of indulging in this spying act. With complete focus on achievement, I was blind to very high level of personal risk. The excitement of doing something unusual and crucial from the organizations point of view was enormous and had overshadowed the personal risk, I was taking in this voyage.

With the new market information in our hands, we redefined our corporate strategies:

- Discard extensive packing used for our perishable product to withstand the challenges of train transportation and airlift the product. The reduction in package cost and the advantage of reaching fresh stocks to the market compensated increase in transportation cost.
- We also hired a cold storage space at Bangalore to chill the product before airlifting.
- Further capital investments to augment our quality to combat competition.
- Seriously explore export markets.

Airlifting our stocks was rather innovative during those days and an aggressive corporate strategy as our products reached the customers fresh and potent. Our strategies took the competition by total surprise, and we could even marginally increase our market share, breaking into new customer segments. At the bottom of our success, was one courageous trip by myself to assess competition and our redefined corporate strategy.

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