

Anatomy of a spiritual enterprise: How is it different from a business?

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For years I was a corporate boffin, perhaps more correctly a corporate buffoon. Shorn of hubris, this is what most executives are.

Then I stumbled into the higher realms of spiritual enterprises. My business background did help in a way. I was a specialist in turnarounds of ailing companies using quality and performance enhancement as key tools. It was easy to make a connection between Six Sigma and Bhagavad Gita. What the Japanese rediscovered and the Americans followed through in process management was what Krishna advised Arjuna on the battlefield. It was all about the here and now.

It took me some time to understand a few key similarities and differences between my corporate past and the spiritual present. In all spiritual organizations, there is a hierarchy. Unlike a corporate pyramid, in a spiritual enterprise it is a more elegant but more confusing system of concentric circles. It is something like a Microsoft hierarchy of unequal equals, but seemingly more noble.

There is a leader at the center, near but distant, and infallible. Around him the organization grows in circles, like widening ripples in water. The inner circle comprises the uniformed guardians of the flame, who ostensibly have given up the pleasures of the

world and bank balances. Closer scrutiny would reveal that many still file their tax returns, perhaps overseas.

The leader is usually titled as Maharishi, Bhagavan, Paramahansa or with multiple Sris, but always fondly addressed as Guruji or Swamiji. The titles are self-proclaimed by the leader, but with just the right tinge of reluctance. This is enough for the inner circle to then come up with many more fanciful titles. Finally, in frustrated joy, the leader hesitantly accepts the title that he had himself originally proposed!

Those in circles farther out are not so lucky as the inner circle. They need to believe in surrender and practice it. More they surrender, more they grow spiritually. To be accepted, they need to surrender their assets to the leader's mission. Once that is accomplished, one grows lighter in spirit and of course certainly in bank balance. It is not that Guruji does not trust them with their wealth, but it is good for their karma to renounce wealth in his favor. After all, the leader is beyond karma and is doing them a favor.

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Then, there are those beyond the pale, outside the circles. They are the pariahs who are allowed only to gaze but not to touch. The way to move up the circular maze is to work, work and work. Selfless service is the motto. Working for the mission is nobler than any other service. You quickly learn that in all other forms of service, however noble you may think them to be, you act out of ego. Serving the leader, however, is egoless and therefore guaranteed to enhance you spiritually and lead you to the mythical moksha.

Sad to say, work does not always work. It does not guarantee circular elevation. In fact, many who toil hard and honest, find themselves always at the periphery. Other skills and tricks are needed to penetrate the circles.

In Mahabharata, Abhimanyu is supposed to have learnt to pierce the chakra vyuha, the circular military formation, when he was in his mother's womb. He knew how to enter but not how to get out. There are Abhimanyus in the spiritual enterprise who figure out how to enter the circular formation towards the center. Once they are in, the ranks close behind them.

The closer that one gets to the center, the more difficult it is to get out. One has only two options. The first and the easier one is to surrender one's brains to the system and believe, against all sensory experiences to the contrary, that one is in bliss.

This is not very different from a corporate rat race. But, in the corporate world one is fed well and one knows that one is a rat amongst a pack of rats. Here, in the spiritual enterprise, the rats are brainwashed to believe that they are felines. They are also usually shorn off all

past relations, badly housed, underfed, deprived of sleep and overworked to make the hallucination work. Psychologically, it is an excellent system to foster total submission, without using any coercion. What scientists have only achieved with rats in labs, these spiritual teachers have proved with humans in ashrams.

The other option to exit is much harder. I had often wondered why. After all there are no prison walls. The walls are more insidious. At one level, we all want to believe in something more than ourselves. We all wish to belong to a group that seems to believe in something bigger and beyond us. In order to reach that illusory state, the system convinces you to look at your family, even your spouse as a disturbance, and even as an enemy. To exit is to commit suicide. The victims are so well conditioned that they feel that they are destroying themselves by opting out. I am sure psychologists have better terms to describe such conditions of voluntary enslavement. But, I doubt if they have a solution.

The golden chain that binds one to a corporation is through material benefits and power. A similar chain of bondage exists in the spiritual enterprise as well. The difference is that the chain here is virtual and imposed by oneself. One feels virtuous being enslaved. Therefore, breaking free is far more difficult. One is like a dog chasing its own tail.

The goal of all spiritual paths is supposed to be Self-discovery. The irony is that one does not need the spiritual enterprise once one discovers oneself. One then believes in the atma guru, the master within. Leaders of spiritual enterprises understand this only too well. If the enterprise is to be sustained and the leader is to flourish, the carrot of

Self-discovery has to be dangled just of reach. This is perhaps why all these leaders carry a stick, the danda, just as mule drivers do!

The beauty of the concept of Self-discovery, also called Self-realization or Enlightenment is that no one exactly knows what it is all about. It is after all a highly subjective experience. In fact, the scriptures say that those who experienced Self-realization never express it and those who express it have never experienced it. Going by this definition, any one who calls oneself enlightened is automatically suspect. In fact, that person would be a fraud.

There have been honest people who preached spirituality and guided others towards their spiritual enhancement. But, they never called themselves enlightened. They never established organizations. They never encouraged people to follow them. In fact, they made it difficult for any one to be a disciple. All that they pointed was towards a

space within, where we can achieve true and everlasting peace. Such people were true masters. They never established or marketed a spiritual enterprise.

Anyone who does, any one who proselytizes in one way or another a spiritual enterprise, is a commercial worker. In fact, they are far worse than the most corrupt corporate leaders. At least, corporate leaders can only corrupt you materially. A spiritual fraud can corrupt our spirit. No spiritual enterprise, in whatever fashion it promotes itself, is any better than a cult. I am not referring here to any one specific enterprise or entrepreneur. All spiritual enterprises, once they establish themselves as organizations, become corrupt. It is terrible to hear, but true.

In the next article in this three article series, I shall explore the business side of these enterprises to prove my point.

I Know.... I Can....

Sense of belonging lends itself to many positives. It encourages freedom of thought and action. Let me narrate a few examples and then tell you why I did so.

Sometime during the late 1970s, I was Manager of a Bank in Gujarat. Times were bad; emergency had just been lifted and people's mood was menacing; bank loans were hard to get as there were no funds. In these adverse circumstances, I met Rakesh Kumar Konsol, a young lad from Bihar selling incense sticks for a living and trying to collect money to go back to college and finish his studies in medicine. His parents were of no help. Bank loan was no go because he had no security or guarantees to offer. I decided to play the role of a mentor to him and have an education loan sanctioned. After much ado, I had the loan sanctioned, ensured his readmission to the college and monitored his expenses meticulously. I continued with this endeavor till I remained Manager of the branch. A couple of years later, I received a surprise visit from Konsol who had by now become a full-fledged doctor and who was eager to seek my wishes before moving forward. I felt grateful to my bank for giving me the freedom to do what I felt was right.

Surat, the diamond capital of India, was not the cleanest city in mid 1990s. How dirty it was got shockingly revealed when plague hit it epidemically. Everyone but everyone abandoned the city to its doom... everyone except my colleagues from the bank. They stayed put in town, kept all their branches open for emergency services, fanned out to meet benevolent persons and organizations to raise funds for medicines, masks and gloves for use by municipal workers and police personnel. Women staff members opened community kitchens to feed people while their male counterparts directed clearing dead rats from roads. Their efforts were warmly appreciated by World Health Organisation Chief. The crowning glory was when the city was cleaned up of the mess, bureaucracy took complete charge of the situation and very soon Surat became the cleanest city in India. Freedom to act conferred by the bank was responsible for its subjects to do what they knew was right.

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