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TOXICITY AT THE WORKPLACE

Some unfortunate developments, fatally impacting the lives of young employees, prompts us to take a close and hard look at safety at the workplace. It is time that this becomes centre stage in informed conversation.

In a month from now, persons living in the national capital of Delhi will begin to brace themselves for braving the toxicity that resides in the atmosphere. Plans and promises notwithstanding, the problem of air pollution, and its devastating effects on the health of humankind, has not gone away.

Even before the thoughts of polluted winter months have started occupying mind space, the toxicity in the corporate workplace has manifested itself in a cruel fashion. A few weeks ago, in a shocking incident, a young lady employee at a Big-4 accounting firm, died of exhaustion at the workplace. Subsequent reports pointed to the fact that for seven days every week, without any break, she had put in close to 16 hours per day. While the very tragic outcome seemed initially to be one of a kind, news reports mentioned that in a large bank, a lady employee fell from her chair and passed away. A couple of days later, in Thailand, an employee, who was denied leave, collapsed and died. There are no prizes for guessing that excessive workload could have been a major causative factor, with no sign of a respite in the near future. Following the first of these incidents, a number of reactions have surfaced from persons who have complained about similar non-ending working hours, and are either bravely staying on, or have moved out of those jobs to seek relative peace elsewhere. Trolls, both the unemployed variety, and the unemployable variety, have been quick to point out that the blame should be laid at the doorsteps of the young persons, who in search of career progression and higher emoluments, were themselves neglecting their health. The sad fact that uninformed comment is free, played out in all its ugliness.

Why, one might ask, is a newsletter focussing on corporate governance, starting off with these tragic incidents? The answer is simple, but is worth stating in some detail. Employees constitute a very major set of stakeholders in the corporate ecosystem. It is based on their sweat and toil that companies generate profits, and share those profits with the higher placed individuals in the organisation. To ignore the basic requirement of a safe and healthy workplace is to act against the interest of a very major segment of stakeholders, and is an unsustainable practice, not only in the long term, but even in the near term.

Why does this happen? Is it not-so-benign neglect on the part of the management, in the hope that nothing will go wrong, since the average Indian youth needs employment, and an income to take care of his /her needs and aspirations? Considering that employee health is important, organisations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), have clearly laid down the maximum number of working hours per week that different categories of employees should be subjected to, depending on the kind of work that they are expected to do. The fact that the ILO stipulations, and the directions issued by national and sub-national governments have been summarily ignored, is a subject for another day. Suffice it to say that unless punitive action is taken, where negligence is established, it will be an unending saga of young lives regrettably lost, or the motivation levels reduced to completely unacceptable levels.

It is fairly clear that part of the problem resides at the supervisory level. The compensation of supervisors is based on the quantity and quality of output that their team members are able to produce. Quality will in any case take a beating if week after week, without any break, they are subjected to backbreaking working hours. As for quantity, it is possible that by economising on the numbers in the workforce, more per capita production is being attempted. This should be made a punishable offence. As a sane voice said in a very pointed comment, if the work increases, you must get more people. The answer does not lie in overloading those that are already at the workplace.

The solution to that part of the problem is to revisit the incentivising mechanism for persons at the supervisory levels. In addition to output, which cannot be wished away, is safety and health of the subordinates at the workplace an element in the compensation of the supervisory staff? Is not it time that these aspects, such as caring for one's team, and ensuring that they enjoy what they are doing, are made elements of compensation? This is an aspect of governance that needs enlightened leadership to immediately apply its mind to, and to come up with company-neutral, and perhaps industry-neutral solutions.

Yet another contributor to the negative working environment is the repetitive nature of unthinking jobs, which reduces humankind to machines. Should there not be, as a governance mechanism, a system where there is rotation of persons at the junior levels, so that they get to do newer kinds of assignments, in the expectation that the novelty will reduce the tedium, and ensure that mental tiredness at least is appropriately addressed. Such rotation will also address the problem of vested interests being developed.

One recent report indicates that the workplace of one of the employees, who met with an unfortunate end, did not have a license for the last few years. Everyone concerned, whether it is the licensee or the licensing authority, should be suitably punished if this is established. Licenses are meant to ensure that there is conformity with the minimum acceptable levels for a healthy work environment. This in any case cannot be compromised.

The silence of the cognoscenti, who should have sat up and taken notice of this unfortunate event, is deafening. Will this conspiracy of silence lead to the problems, that gave rise to these outcomes, being wished away, in the hope that they will not manifest in another workplace elsewhere?

The unfortunate and universally condemned loss of life by a young intern in a Kolkata hospital is also an outcome of an unsafe workplace. The minimum physical and infrastructural requirements at many of these workplaces, especially hospitals, are far from being in place. It is almost as if the unstated chorus is that work has been going on all these days, and will go on even if these problems are not fixed. Dark corridors, missing latches or fasteners on the door, broken windowpanes, and the like, might, on the surface, seem small matters in the larger scheme of things of persons administering large institutions. Yet it is attention to such details that makes for a workplace that is not merely safe, but is tempting enough for persons to be a part of, and to contribute to. What is often not realised is that it takes one incident for a mutual lack of trust to kick in, and become all-pervasive. Teamwork will then go for a toss, and individuals will adopt an attitude of self-preservation, and do what is minimally required in ensuring their safety and security. This is not something that needs to be scoffed at. It must be a part of the KRA of every person in a supervisory position, whether in an office, a hospital, or a factory, to provide for an enabling environment, in which team members feel motivated and charged up to do more than what is required from them. A few extra working hours, on account of some emergent requirements, could be par for the course. Yet if it goes upto twice the number of average working hours, with no break whatsoever, work and the persons concerned will suffer in equal measure.

Trusting employers alone to do what is necessary, in the context of a wakeup call, as gruesome as this, is asking for too much. Many of them will continue to live in denial. Should there not be, as a governance measure, a system of periodic intensive workplace audits, undertaken by external experts, to ensure that things are not allowed to remain as unacceptable, as they are at present? Should it have to wait before persons of all age groups take to the streets to protest in order to protect themselves, occasionally braving the cane charges of the police force, which might only be doing its job, and cannot be blamed. The street is not the ideal location to settle such matters. Proactive institutional leadership, which engages constructively with all segments of the workforce, accepts blame where necessary, receives suggestions from whichever source it comes, and facilitates consultative decision-making, is clearly the need of the hour. Pending these measures, all the tick-box compliance exercises, that regulatory prescriptions warrant, will continue forever and a day.

News reports have it that Ministry of Labour is undertaking an inquiry into what caused the sad event of a young employee losing her life. This is at best a partial response. Corrective measures may perhaps be taken as a result of this exercise. This should not stand in the way of preventive measures, such as random inspections of workplaces, to ensure whether basic requirements are in place. It is no one's contention that this should degenerate into inspector raj, with all its concomitant faults. Instead, there could be, for each institution, a committee of visitors, which, at periodic intervals, visits these places, talks to the stakeholders, and figures out whether there are matters that they, on behalf of the workforce, can project to the management, since the young workers themselves would often not summon the courage to do so. The fact that such a committee exists, should itself drive managements to be on their guard. In the alternative, there could be peer evaluation by persons from another branch of the same organisation, so that a partially external perspective can be brought to bear on determination of the deficiencies. Unless innovative solutions are attempted, sub-human workplaces will continue to exist, and suboptimal work practices will survive.

Much is being made of the compliance that large companies have with the requirements of the various pillars of ESG. Large firms, such as the Big-4, render consultancy services in such matters. Is it not necessary for them to put their own house in order when it comes to the human rights elements under the governance pillar?

To amend, for contextual relevance, an extract from JFK's inaugural address: "Ask not what your company is doing for you; ask what it should be doing for you".

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