

VUCA and the HR/OD Practitioner

About the Author



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Raghu is a post-graduate from IIT Madras who has focused on human behaviour. He brings together his Yoga Sadhana and understanding of technological systems to bear on his central quest: “how can every one of us be the best that we can be?” He uses Theatre and Puranas to enable people to discover their own leadership style. He is now engaged in creating a Coaching Academy "Awakening Arjuna". Look up www.raghuananthanarayanan.com for more details.

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In our work with people we (Consulting team of FLAME TAOknoware) focus on the hidden parts of the proverbial ice berg- the meaning making processes of people. In laboratory learning contexts the superficial layers of thought-action give way to an understanding of feeling- thought. We often come across a deep conflict between the identity processes of the individual and their role taking modalities. This conflict is rooted in the idea that one must suppress ones own natural ways of feeling and thinking, and adopt ways that are appropriate to a “professional” context. We have spoken about these conflicts at length in some of our papers and blogs

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dharmakshetra-self-worth-raghu-ananthanarayanan>;
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/bricolage-jugaad-indianness-part-1-gagandeep-singh>;
<https://gamblingthroughlife.org/2016/11/16/indian-resilience-paradox-of-dharma/>).



To give a short summary of our understanding: one’s identity is shaped in very Indian ways; this implies that ideas of self and the world are based on implicitly internalized memes. To give some example- time is cyclical and birth and death are punctuation marks in an endless journey; role discipline is an internal affair and based on ones own commitment to a dharma. Organizations are not seen through this implicit lens, but through a set of learnt ideas that are based on a western frame. Time in this frame is linear and Role discipline is an externally established idea. The difference between a “Jugalbandhi” (Indian term from its vocal music traditions literally meaning ‘entwined twins’) and an orchestra is a good analogy.

Let us examine the word “dharma” to illustrate a point: Dharma is a word of contextual primacy to Indian living. It asks of a person to make choices that enliven oneself and one’s context simultaneously. Western ideas of ethics and morality are more or less defined. So the idea of dharma does not lend itself to the dynamics of

structural control as easily as a statement of “values” and ethics. Dharma Sankata is a commonly understood term where the person who experiences the pulls of a dilemma has to delve within and take responsibility for making choices.

How does this impact Organization Culture? When a person treats one’s own meaning making framework as illegitimate, along with it, the most authentic and powerful areas of self are kept away from the theatre of action. While in times of ‘peace and calm’ one can manage this internal split, in times of stress or crisis, the deeply held (often core) ways of being come to the fore. The individual experiences an inner conflict, and tries hard to control these powerful subconscious impulses. This causes a lot of internal waste of energy in the individual. Work arounds or plain and simple withdrawal is often the coping strategy.

The deeply held preferences are making their presence felt even in fairly every day transactions: Big Mac has found it necessary to Indianise their offerings. The Bollywood cinema has a huge appeal all over the world as does the big Indian wedding. However, Indian Managers rarely give themselves the authority to influence their organizations based on their own insights. The choicefulness from inner realization as denoted via dharma can help get out of this reticent mind set in our times. Indian Multinationals are making a mark in the world, Indian Managers are leading many Global Corporations and being Indian can only be an asset and not a liability.

What are the key challenges facing organizations today? While there are many in the so called VUCA (volatile-uncertain-complex-ambiguous) world, I would like to focus on these three dilemmas that challenge dharmic spaces, since they allow us to see how we can leverage the positives of our identity in responding to them:

1. To distinguish between what is changing and what is not
2. To distinguish between what is Global and what is not
3. To distinguish between making money and building organizations that last

Dilemma 1: To distinguish between what is changing and what is not

A few decades back we started hearing the term “design for obsolescence”. Organizations came to face the reality that to have a steady year on year growth and income, they had to ensure that consumers buy regularly. The fashion industry is the obvious icon of this idea, but if we look at many of the things we use, we are made to feel foolish and unhappy if we do not have the latest gadget. The speed of change in the technology we use or the proliferation of choices we have in the material world leads us to believe that the change is deep and profound.

Let me illustrate how this confusion manifests itself in human behavior. I was gifted a very nice book for the new year: “Drawn Together”¹. The author Leah Pearlman has had a distinguished career in Facebook. She quit and started Dharma Comics because in her words “....my life looked great from the outside. But what was going on inside? Dharma Comics gave me the courage to finally look. And do you know what I found? Me! A perfectly human human.” It is very easy to get caught with the changes we are creating in our immediate and not-so-immediate environment without realizing that the “perfectly human human” has changed very little in the last million years or so!

This then is one vital differentiation for the HR/OD professional to make: what of the human being is changing, what is enduring and where does the person’s angst arise from?

The newest area of science that is exciting for a HR professional is neuro sciences. While it speaks a lot about neuro plasticity and learning, one of its major area of study and interest is stress. Stress is generated when the old brain, the mid brain and the new brain are in conflict. Most of the strategies that are put forward to deal with this stress come from Eastern practices of Mindfulness and Yoga. We are naturally placed to take advantage of this rise in empirical evidence from the West on the brain’s functioning.

Let us look at a related and Organization wide issue: In our work we find that the difficulty in distinguishing between the process of conducting a business and the content of the business is rendering choice-making difficult for the average HR professional. The content is visible, measurable and definable while the underlying human dynamics is not. Content and strategy can be changed easily, human behavior and culture change

slowly. The ability to distinguish between the visible and measurable areas of a business and the invisible and non-measurable is key to focusing on what really matters in human reality. The impact of the non-measurable on the measurable is immeasurable!

Let me illustrate, every organization develops a strategy. They have a more or less robust way of tracking trends, calculating the EBITDA (Earnings before Interest, Tax, Depreciation and Amortization) of possible alternatives and so on. But the strategizing process is often poor: Dialogue and discussion about the contextual challenges, evoking and inviting innovative thinking on the impacts as well as grounded action is seldom seen as important. They are time consuming and imply encountering human dynamics. There are two consequences of this focus on the visible at the cost of the invisible: firstly, the strategy is simply a number crunching game, and it is converted into a set of goals and driven 'down' the organization. Most of the people who have to implement the strategy do not really understand the variables and the connections. They cannot make meaning of situations in ways that enable the strategy to get reflected in everyday decision-making. Secondly, the process of creating capacity is not fully understood. At best the idea that new competencies are needed to execute strategy is acknowledged. But, technological capability is a combination of the new techniques as well as the way people feel about the new, the way they resolve new conflicts and the way they collaborate across the new techniques. The processes that energize the contextualization and meaning of strategy are underinvested in.

This is where the HR/OD professional has the opportunity for greatest impact, and when the person is not alive to the invisible processes, the opportunity for impact is lost. The pressure to do something is answered by looking at new computerized methods of creating efficiency, or following the latest trend.

Another area of confusion is the multi-location, multi-skilled nature teams that constitute task groups. These groups are "networks" but the picture-in-the-mind of the members of the group is often derived from the classical hierarchy. HR/OD professionals who have not understood the new process reality often flounder. In one of the multi locational and multi organizational collaborative projects we were asked to "trouble shoot" we found two dysfunctional processes. Firstly, the tendency to get caught with cultural difference as a catch-all for problems between team members. So, when a Chinese Team was not able to deliver the required specs of one part of the Mechatronics product, it was attributed to the negatives of the 'closed' culture. Secondly, when we examined the issue we found that work design and work definition that had been done by the HR people in consultation with the Project Head followed the "Fix job responsibilities and create role clarity" mode - a vestige of classical organization thinking. Deriving a way of defining the customer-supplier linkages of the value stream and using that to define how the individual adds value and ensures workflow was missing. When we redefined work on this basis, lo and behold, the cultural issues vanished! There were some lingering issues of the way people addressed and understood each other, and how they preferred to deal with conflict, but the roots of the conflict were removed and what remained was much less toxic. The HR/OD fashion of looking at diversity was way out of synch with reality because the job description and appraisals were designed on an unreliable premise of the system.

(This concept has been examined this in great depth in our book "Organization Development and Design: The Tensegrity Mandala"²)

Dilemma 2 : To Distinguish Between What is Global and What is Not

The word role is used as though it has a unique meaning. In our experience, it does not. Role to a western mind is a task anchored idea, to an Indian mind (and we discover so in people from China and Japan too) it has stronger relationship connotations that are often more compelling than the task implications of the word. Let me illustrate. While coaching leaders in a very large IT organization, I have come across two seemingly different issues that have the same root. Women leaders find it very hard to be part of the team because they feel that the informal consensus building processes are denied to them. Discussions at the coffee corner or the smokers' corner for instance are not natural or desirable conversation spots for them. They cannot strike up the casual camaraderie there, that their male colleagues create among themselves. Trying to do so has possibilities of being misunderstood, especially in an Indian context. So, they come to a meeting and hear only

the tangible task elements of decisions. They have no idea of the other contextual information available to the larger decision community. Decisions relayed by their bosses have a similar lacuna. They do not feel part of the community, and their “role clarity and their ability to shape their role” is considerably diminished. Men who work for women bosses have spoken about another issue, they don't know their bosses' thinking! Read between the lines: the informal channels through which we built a relationship with our bosses is missing. We need to feel the relational security so that we know how to interpret the task.

The idea that people are different is given lip service. Programs in diversity or understanding culture are often superficial. The HR/OD professional who can listen deeply can sense these differences and initiate institution building processes that can enable trust building at a deep level. Lack of trust has huge consequences measurable in the quality, timeliness and cost of the outputs of a team. In another example, a Chinese person working in an Indian Multinational sought a reading list from me. He wanted to know different versions about the Independence movement. He wanted to read papers on Caste relations and how they are evolving. His HR manager, an Indian was not knowledgeable enough and was too shy of having an honest conversation about these realities. When I spoke with him in another context I discovered that his understanding was not only superficial, it was confined to what is written about the country by conventional text-book writers. When I probed further, I discovered that he was very uncomfortable with both his lack of study as well as the types of criticisms he read. But, he said, “we are a global company and we must not speak about parochial things”.

I have come across this suppression of one's indigenous heritage or history in the false idea that being modern and professional means hiding all that is inherent and traditional. Dr. Brice Gibb and I worked in an organization to introduce the practice of self managing teams and quality circles. During one of the sessions, the manager of the shop floor came up to us and talked about the ways his father would conduct panchayats. He belonged to an old and respected family that had kept alive many of his community traditions. He spoke about the idea of a “Koodam”, the space in a traditional home where collective processes of consensus building took place. The rules of the game when a Koodam was called were very similar to what we were teaching. These were 1. “no blame” 2. “no status or role differentiation” and 3. “Commitment to the group dharma”. The moment we endorsed his understanding, he was in his elements, his posturing fell away, he was warm with his team, rediscovered his humour and really built a community of people who were committed to making world class armatures. By the way he was working in a “foreign Multinational”, and the president of his division was very interested in the methods we were employing and we eventually co-authored a paper with the American Consultant based on many “Indian” concepts!³

The idea of global that is indistinguishable from homogenization is deeply internalized by many Indian professionals. In the process, they deny a great resource namely their intimate understanding of the local, the indigenous and the positives of the heritage. The price they pay internally and the value they withhold from the organization is immense. If one looks at the innovations spawned by the close association of several researchers in the “Mindfulness” the EQ movement (Jon Kabat -Zinn and Daniel Goleman to name the most prominent) with the Dalai Lama one would have to rethink their idea of Global= Western and become more respectful of their indigenous wisdom. One is not suggesting an ill-considered deployment, but one where the ideas can be brought forth, experimented with and added to the mosaic of what makes the current world truly global. Nowhere are indigenous ideas more critical than in the area of understanding human beings.

The HR/OD profession is therefore ideally positioned to make critical contributions to the growth of his/her own organization by deploying appropriate wisdom and to contribute to global knowledge in this area.

Dilemma 3 : To Distinguish Between Making Money and Building Organizations That Last

One has to just take a casual look at the number of start-ups that shut down to appreciate the importance of distinguishing between being in business to make money, and building an organization that can remain in business. Often the idea of being an entrepreneur is confused with being an expedient profiteer. Peter Drucker in one of his early works on Management argued that the task of the business manager is to create value. He argued that the gross profit a company needs to make to remain in business is greater than one just trying to make money. It has to invest in R&D, in its people and build for the future. Buckminster Fuller⁴ has argued that

many outcomes are spin offs of the ability of a person or a group to follow a meaningful purpose. Money is the fallout of a business focused on creating real value for the customer. If one takes the present global crisis into view, that purpose ought to include sustainability of our environment. No great business is ever built on answering the question why are we in business? By saying “to make money”. The traditional business families in India have lived by this maxim and have contributed to philanthropic causes as part of the way they are.

We see many HR/OD professionals become excited with the prospect of helping start-ups make money. They then often end up bringing in a very utilitarian perspective into their work. They focus on “hiring the best”; “firing the dead-wood”; “applying the bell curve” and so on. Indian craft groups are a great source of learning for us. They may be a fundamental meme in the Indian mind. Craft groups respect their lineage, and this includes many culture building and trust-enhancing practices that are embedded in their everyday work. On the surface, they seem old and meaningless. But they build in a process of learning, teaching and improvement. To illustrate, crafts groups induct their neophytes to the trade by making them responsible for the tools used, then they are taught small tasks. The craftspersons often discuss the work in progress, they refer back to old stories, use analogies drawn from other arts like music and dance to innovate on the work they are doing. Above all, they treat the work as sacred, since it is their source of livelihood.

If one compares this with some of the stories one hears about Steve Jobs of Apple, the parallels are amazing. His obsession with creating a great product was very much like the craftsperson. His discussions with his design group reflect many of the characteristics we see in the craft groups. When the devotion to the primary purpose of creating value is lost, the organization resorts to unethical ways. Wells Fargo is an institution in crisis in USA. Kingfisher in India has become synonymous with marketing hype covering up corrupt practices at the heart of the enterprise.

The opportunity that the HR/OD professional has in creating a sense of purpose that is meaningful, enabling practices that build trust and pride at the heart of all the members of the team engrossed in a work-a-day world is immense. We have also seen that the way trust and pride is built up is unique to the core group that leads the business. The unconsciously imbibed ideas of self, the world and money they hold influences the whole organization. Often in India, these modes are recognized, but held in self-censorship or self-hate. “This is a brahminical organization; this is Marwari” and so on. Thus, an intrinsic and instinctive sensing and response is sought to be covered up and oppressed, but shows through anyway. Often the drive to create, to excel and often the core of a dharma lies in this deeply internalized cultural mode. Where this is owned up, we have seen people joke about it, but in the owning up there is also the freeing to look at the positives and the negatives and to evolve. HR/OD processes cannot go against the grain of this energy. Making money is never the essential dharma of any committed entrepreneur I have met in India. My book “Leadership Dharma- Arjuna the Timeless Metaphor” (Productivity and Quality Publishers- 2016) examines this struggle between the driving dream and the pragmatics of business that leaders face.

The HR/OD professional is the custodian of the heart of the organizations, its grounding in an evocative meaning and purpose to work for.

Conclusion

In the rush to respond to the world often defined by the term VUCA, we find HR/OD professionals getting carried away. They forget that people do not change with every change in technology or organizational redesign! Individuals learn new ways of coping based on their deeply internalized ways of meaning-making and choice-making. These ways are civilizationally defined and internalized through belonging to one’s family and community. We have found that when we are able to help the leaders and managers of Indian organizations, or the Indian part of Multinationals to trust their own intuition they have been able to come up with meaningful responses to the challenges they face. Also, reclaiming their authenticity enables them to be more assertive and powerful in their ways of expressing themselves. For example, many “captive” IT organizations internalize the identity of being captive. This enhances all the self-deprecating tendencies we have discussed above. Enabling the managers to acknowledge this process has released them from a subservient way of role taking and allowed them to be innovative at the technical solutioning as well as begin to

“shape” their roles rather than passively accept what is offered. The benefits arising from this impact not only their own sense of well being but also the organization. When HR/OD practitioners start to see how a deep understanding of the positives of the Indian mind can be leveraged for creating vibrant and wholesome organizations, they will start playing leadership roles with impact.

References

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