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Book Review

Kenneth Abeywickrama, *Adventures in Management: A Saga of Managing in a Developing Country*, SAGE Publications, 2007, Pages: 224,

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Introduction

Adventures in Management: A Saga of Managing in a Developing Country is a book which blends philosophical concepts with the author's real life experiences in the public sector, private sector, and from national and international exposure. Hence, this book takes inter-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary approaches which theorises the concepts from sociology, psychology, labour relations, international relations, philosophy, and economics. The theories from different disciplines are injected to the practice in an appropriate manner. This enables evaluating the forms of good and bad "management". Furthermore, the reader gets the signal that being "multidisciplinary" becomes a necessary ingredient of the recipe of "management" in a dynamic business context. This book makes the reader aware of as to how and why the manager should possess the knowledge of all aspects of the organisation. Moreover, the simple form of written language encourages continuous reading which adds value to the piece of writing.

The audience of beneficiaries includes managers, scholars and academics.

Contents

This book comprises of three comprehensive chapters. The first chapter highlights the typical culture of a government organisation where chaos, change, and unwritten rules were inherent in the system. Hence, Abeywickrama tries to explain the importance of managing these through appropriate strategies. The cultural characteristics such as gang culture, face saving, and enforced discipline (Jayawardena, 2004) are identified as difficult areas to manage. Nevertheless, Abeywickrama refuses the divide between manager and the subordinate based on class, caste and race stressing the importance of learning from subordinates: "To accept that ordinary workers, who are often regarded as a somewhat cruder and intellectually inferior species of humanity, are mostly decent and intelligent

people who can perform at high levels of competence, given the right circumstances and training” (p. 32).

Chapter two presents how a manager becomes a weak point in front of governance due to party politics. Abeywickrama stresses that even though a well-defined and established way of controlling and management is in place, party politics could lead to loss of transparency and euphemism. However, author noted that “...getting people to work with a will without excessive dependence on rule books and disciplinary codes which dictate punishments for infringements of orders, and praise and minor rewards for exceptionally good performance”(p. 49).

It is clear that autonomy has a greater bearing on performance. The skilful labour was lost to competitors due to bureaucratic structures of government institutions. The author’s experience in a multinational corporation justified this fact. Further, nurturing under an expatriate chairman, gave space for the managers to adopt good practices such as being “fair minded”. Furthermore, the author had personally experienced conflicts with the superiors irrespective of the sector the organisation belonged to. Impact of management style subsequent to becoming a pseudo-socialist country is discussed in detail, particularly in a multinational corporation. Networking too was perceived as an important ingredient in developing a business. The exposure and the experience in the Middle East, as well as the merits and demerits of multinational corporations were also unearthed.

Abeywickrama convincingly explains that public services can be managed in chapter three. Attracting capable private sector senior managers, meeting the workers in person, being a “people centred” manager, understanding the reality, making decisions in favour of the employees before trade unions raise their voice, provision of uniforms and bonus to employees, making royalty payments to the government, and development of a corporate culture where the promotions are based on merits and not on seniority, are some of the strategies explored. Hence, these strategies were proposed in an environment where the political power acquired was rarely surrendered. Author as a senior manager of a government institution never allowed unfair treatment and unlawful decisions. He even confronted the minister. Finally he withdrew himself from the public sector having realised the severity of corrupted politics.

Evaluation

It is a fact that most studies of managerial behaviour are from perspectives of developed countries, where most transnational corporations are located and from where the levers of the world economy are handled. However, developing economies are becoming a part of the global economy. The curiosity of the reader is aroused as to who is a successful manager; is he/she from a developed country or a developing country? The author explains that the politics, the social structures, the cultural attitudes of people, are often dissimilar and cannot be carbon copies of the counterparts of the developing world. Moreover, the multinational corporations which have developed successful systems of management had to customise their management style suiting the developing country’s cultural values and influence of local personnel. Nevertheless, the book highlights that similarities of management supersede dissimilarities irrespective of the context.

The author has identified corruption as a pervasive role of politicians which inhibits the management in developing countries. On the other hand, corruption is a common feature in industrialised countries. The legal controls and publicity of scandals in developed countries act as mitigating factors. Conversely the legal restraints are diluted and civil society is apathetic, taking for

granted that politicians are corrupt and the only remedy is to adjust accordingly. Thus, the managers have to work within the system leaving behind personal philosophy and morals.

The human frailties of powerful political and business leaders are a subject that leads to great caution. Author has explored this with practical examples. He also noted that the theory alone would not help managing people in a productive manner, but should be blended with experiences in real life situations. The author elucidates that his philosophy of management evolved over time. He too expresses that ordinary human beings in developing countries are endowed with a high degree of intelligence, capacity for hard work, loyalty, and innate decency.

Conclusion

The book itself is an adventure which arouses the curiosity of the reader. Evolution of the management style and the changing behaviour of the employees following the 1956 'Peoples' Revolution' in Sri Lanka characterised by left-wing, nationalist and communalist elements, and 1978 economic liberalisation were well explored both in public and private sectors.

The author enumerates that the worker or an ordinary employee is rarely given credit for the success of the business. Nevertheless, the author's efforts in both public and private sector recognised and rewarded the employee performance. Moreover, the author suspended the middle class cultural values about subordinate class that are imbued in managers from the upper social class. Change of male dominant culture in the top management and identification of innate qualities of the subordinates, drove the organisational culture towards a friendly atmosphere. Good management is the key to the development of the developing world whereby the talents of the people and the resources of the countries will be optimally used. Yet the political process bombarded with corruption has hindered the practice of good governance. Enforcing "discipline" is a must irrespective of the brutality and the changes.

The author has mentioned that Japanese management practices of innovation, and development through genuine employee participation and suggestions, were not known in the nineteen sixties in Sri Lanka. Still it is not clear as to how these practices emerged in Sri Lanka subsequently. It is subject to argument whether the managers could be trained to interact on a human level with labour. Thus it cannot be concluded that conventional management training would not help. Last but not least it is a matter of good management to be sustainable in spite of politics, corruption, and cultural attitudes.

About the Author

Abeywickrama was a prominent lecturer in Marketing in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Malaysia, as well as at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad on behalf of the Commonwealth Secretariat. He started his career as a wharf superintendent in 1958 at the newly nationalised Port of Colombo. He joined Lever Brothers afterwards as a senior manager in Marketing. He had been a senior public servant at Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and State Timber Corporation. He had also been a marketing consultant to 26 large corporations in Sri Lanka and subsequently joined World Bank as an international development consultant. He moved to the United States of America in 1992.

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