

LEARNING THE ART OF BEING TRULY SELFISH

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A Farmer, whose corn always took the first prize at the State Fair, had the habit of sharing his best corn seeds with all the farmers in the neighbourhood. When asked why, he said, "It is really a matter of self interest. The wind picks up the pollen and carries it from field to field, so if my neighbours grow inferior corn, the cross pollination brings down the quality of my own corn. So I am concerned they plant only the very best."

Over the years having worked with variety of groups and people, it is increasingly becoming evident that many of us fail to understand how to work in our own interest in the real sense. Not many of us usually act the way the farmer did. I have tried understanding what prevents us from being able to act in our own interest. One of the main reasons for not being able to work in our interest is our in-ability to make the distinction between some of the critical factors of life such as

Being short sighted	Vs.	Far sighted
Feeling of insecurity	Vs.	Feeling of security
Mindlessness	Vs.	Mindfulness
Externally driven	Vs.	Internally driven
Fear of risking	Vs.	Courage of risking
Others focused	Vs.	Self focused
Collective destruction	Vs.	Collective well being
Lack of trust	Vs.	Trust
Revenge	Vs.	Forgiving
Ignorance	Vs.	Understanding
Driven by past & future	Vs.	Driven by the present

Let us see what each of these distinctions truly mean.

Being short sighted Vs. Far sighted

Most of the individuals seem to respond to a situation keeping in mind the immediate gain and not the overall gain. There seems to be a lack of clarity on the far reaching implications of one's own actions. One seems to be willing to forgo manifold gains in the lure of insignificant immediate gain. There apparently seems to be a comfort understanding a piece of a puzzle than the whole picture. There is a lack of vision with a long term perspective while responding to a situation. For instance, in the morning, when there is a traffic jam, the driver with an intention to get quicker to his destination, ends up getting into the lane of the traffic coming in the opposite direction and becomes a block in the free flow of traffic which further delays his ultimate goal of reaching earlier to his destination. In the process not only the driver gets delayed he also becomes responsible in delaying others unknowingly though. The same story repeats in many other walks of life too.

The ability to be farsighted brings a greater deal of clarity on one's response to a given situation in the absence of which one fails to act in the real interest of one's own self.

Feeling of insecurity Vs. Feeling of security

Unlike the farmer in the story who operated out of a great sense of security within, many seem to respond out of a feeling of insecurity. While feeling insecure, an individual responds to his/her own inadequacy rather than the need of the situation. In the process one's response obviously is not likely to be in line with what would be appropriate in resolving the conflict. For instance, a corporation begins a price war to recapture the loosing market share than to build in quality and reliability of the product. This in the long run

leaves the corporation with lesser profits to plough back into building a superior product. At an individual level, I am reminded of a conversation a friend of mine had with a consultant while he was trying to identify resource person to support the organization's developmental needs in the Asia Pacific Region. While he was talking to the consultant he was checking out if there was any other person this consultant knew who could be contacted in this regard to which the consultant responded stating "there is nobody other than him who would be able to provide the services he was looking for". Later my friend shared with me that at that very moment he had decided to not interact with this consultant any further and started looking for other consultants. Obviously this consultant did not respond keeping his own interest in the real sense. So did the corporation failed to act in its own interest.

Mindlessness Vs. Mindfulness

Many a time the mindless response of an individual to a given situation leads to greater loss than gain. When an individual responds mindlessly to a situation, he/she is not totally sensitive to the demands of the context and hence, the response becomes inappropriate. In a desire to be more effective, there is a tendency for many of us to standardize our way of responding to a given situation. In this process, one loses the sensitivity that is called for by each individual event which further leads to loss than gain. An interesting illustration which brings out this point clearly is the one in which an organization which was manufacturing consumer durables which included primarily the household furnitures like Cupboards, Almiras, Tables, Chairs etc. The organization had decided that for every individual who got married while working in the organization would be gifted with an Almira of the company and the CEO would personally attend the wedding and gift the keys of the Almira to the couple. Over the years, the process got reduced to the employees being asked to collect a voucher when they got married while in service and collect the Almira until the employees got together and protested the way they were being treated and refused to accept the gift. An activity which was initiated to promote a feeling of belongingness ended up in alienating the employees due to the mindlessness of the organization. Obviously the organization did not act in its own interest.

Externally driven Vs. Internally driven

In the process of being driven by the larger system, an individual or the organization fails to respond appropriately to a given situation and thus ends up losing than gaining. While being guided by the world around, one is likely to act without much of a thought and in the process be governed by others than one's own self. In this process, one becomes a follower than a trendsetter. For instance, many organizations go through the process of ISO certification just because many organizations have done that than understanding why they need to do it. This obviously results in these organizations ending up managing to keep the certificate without any commitment to processes and systems. Thus in the long run, the organization experiences a greater deal of loss in having developed a culture in which there is no real respect for any process or systems, they merely exist. This definitely in the long run doesn't seem to add value to the organization.

Fear of risking Vs. Courage of risking

Individuals and corporations seem to be quite comfortable in following the established path created by oneself or the other. There seems to be a tendency to stick to one's own ways of doing things than the ability to be dynamic in responding to different situations. In a conflicting situation, the general tendency seems to be to respond based on how a similar situation was dealt with in the past than taking a fresh look at the incident and coming up with an appropriate solution. While all of us as individuals and collective groups are well aware that there are no two situations identical or no two conflicts the same, yet many of us prefer to deal with similar situations identically is it dealing with a child or an employee or an idea proposed to bring about a change in the organization. The ability to risk becomes even more lesser when an individual or an organization has tasted a considerable amount of success which by itself leads to the beginning of the downfall of the organization or the individual. One fails to understand that what brought success in the earlier situations was the ability of the individual or the corporation to be able to risk and take steps different from those who are working with similar objectives. The story given below gives an idea on what it means to risk.

The Japanese General Nabunaga decided to attack, even though he had only one soldier to the enemy's ten. He was sure he would win, but his soldiers were full of fear. On the way to the battlefield they stopped at a Shinto Shrine. Nabunaga said to his army, "I shall now toss a coin. If it is heads, we shall win. If tails, we shall lose. Destiny will now reveal itself". He tossed the coin. It was heads. The soldiers were so keyed up for the fight that they wiped out the enemy. Next day an aide said to Nabunaga, "No one can change destiny". "Right", said Nabunaga showing him a coin that was heads on both sides.

While I have been working with people over the last decade, there is one clear understanding which I have gained. It is true that every coin has two sides and so does every successful experience has a bitter failure on the other side of it. While there are n' number of examples which can be quoted on how people and corporations have succeeded, there are equal number of examples if not more that can be quoted on how people failed. The question is not on the availability of example, but it is on where you are looking at these examples from. A person with fear and unwillingness to risk focuses more on the failures while the person with courage and willingness to risk focuses more on the successful experiences. One needs to understand by unwillingness to risk in the long run one is not acted in one's own interest.

Others focused Vs. Self focused

The individuals and corporations who fail to act in their own interest find themselves caught in focusing their attention on others ways of being. These individuals and organizations are so caught up in looking at others that they hardly realize how long it has been having taken a look within. While being others focused, these individuals and organizations become expert copiers or fault finders. These are also the individuals who continue to blame the environment the minute they experience failure. Over the years they also become good armchair critics of the world around them in the process they never realize their own issues. These are the individuals and organizations who don't believe in "if only I can find fault with myself, the way I find fault with others nobody can stop my growth". We continue to behave like the Monks in the story given below.

The pupils of the Tendai School used to study meditation before Zen entered Japan. Four of them who were intimate friends promised one another to observe seven days of silence.

On the first day all were silent. Their meditation had begun auspiciously, but when night came and the oil-lamps were growing dim one of the pupils could not help exclaiming to a servant: "Fix those lamps".

The second pupil was surprised to hear the first one talk, "We are not supposed to say a word", he remarked.

"You two are stupid. Why did you talk?" Asked the third.

"I am the only one who has not talked," concluded the fourth pupil.

By being others focused, it is evident that one has not acted in one's own interest in the long run. These individuals and corporations have neither learnt from others mistakes nor have they been aware of their own mistakes. This leaves them in a world where growth gets closer to an illusion rather than reality.

Collective destruction Vs. Collective well being

These are the individuals and corporations who often choose a lose-lose option where there is a possibility of win-win option. Though these individuals and corporations start with a framework "I win - You lose" eventually they land up in "I lose - You lose". For instance, there is a company manufacturing chemical products which let its waste into the river polluting it completely. The villages nearby who used the river water for their everyday routine started experiencing health problems. Soon they realized the cause and started protesting against the organization. Soon many villages became victim of some of the illness caused by the polluted water and the company which ran a highly profitable business had to shut down. Did the corporation act in its own interest? The answer is obvious. There are many such illustrations at the individual and corporation level which conveys this point very clearly.

Lack of trust Vs. Trust

The individuals and corporations take a route of suspecting rather than trusting. In this process they end up experiencing failure or having marginal growth. They don't realize that in believing that one should not trust others until they proved their trustworthiness end up staking their own growth insisting that the other person should grow before they grow. An organization fails to give unconditional warranty for its product believing that people would misuse. In the process the organization has conveyed its own lack of faith in the quality and reliability of its own product. In the story given below, the citizens lost the faith the king had in them for saving a mug of milk.

The King, in order to check the trustworthiness of his people, asked every citizen to bring a mug full of milk to be poured into a huge pot.

Each citizen thought to himself, "Surely others are going to bring pure milk. So why should I not pour water into the pot? It will hardly make any difference and the King will never know".

When everyone had poured the contents of their mug into the huge pot, the King came to see the collection. To his surprise he found no milk, only water.

Did the citizens really act in their own interest? Not really.

Revenge Vs. Focusing the issue

Quite often individuals and organizations at conscious or subconscious level get into wanting to revenge rather than understanding the issue and dealing with the same. This only distances people from one another instead of solving the issue on hand. Also when an individual or a corporation is caught up in a state of revenge, they fail to act in their own interest. For instance, an organization wanted to teach a lesson to an employee who was playing a leadership role in the labor union. The corporation managed to file a case against him and kept him out for almost 20 years. When the final judgement came, he was reinstated with all the salary due to him. The employee on his hand only became more popular amongst the workmen and started creating more problems. Did the corporation really act in its own interest or did it only buy time for bigger problems? The answer is obvious.

Driven by past & future Vs. Driven by the present

Many a time individuals and corporations get carried away by their past experiences and future anxieties, in the process they fail to remain in the present. It also so happens that corporations and individuals get caught with their past success so much so they fear any deviation from the way they have been operating in order to ensure success. But unfortunately, this by itself becomes their biggest gateway to failure. Not many realize that there is a need to constantly change with the changing context. Quite a few illustrations exist in the corporate world to prove this point.

Conclusion:

It seems quite apparent that not many of us really seem to be acting in our own interest in the real sense. In the eyes of time who happen to be the best judge of various events that occur, most of them seem to be acts of proving, destroying and perishing rather than learning, growing and evolving. It would be just appropriate to conclude this note with Nelson Mandela quoting *Marianne Williamson in 1994 inaugural speech* when South Africa got freedom.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."