

Rameswurlall Basant Roi: “The Growing Role of Human Resource Managers in Modern Business Organisations”

Address by Mr Rameswurlall Basant Roi, Governor of the Bank of Mauritius, at the Annual Congress of the Association of Human Resource Professionals of Mauritius, Balaclava, 5 August 2016.

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Mr Areff Salauroo, President of the Association of Human Resource Professionals of Mauritius

Professor Donald Ah Chuen

Professor McKenna

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening

I am delighted to be here with you this evening. Thank you, Areff, for having invited me for the celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the Association of Human Resource Professionals of Mauritius. My warmest congratulations to you all. I understand you are also having your Annual Congress over two days carrying the theme “The Growing Role of Human Resource Managers in Modern Business Organisations” which, I believe, fits well in the current social and economic context.

As you are aware I re-joined the Bank as Governor again after a long break of eight years which I spent mostly overseas. Having seen the human resource landscape in Mauritius after so many years and the quality of human capital relative to the exigencies of the day, I should express my appreciation to the Association for having chosen this topic. There is an unprecedented gap between the quality of human resources we have at our disposal and the quality of human capital needed to escape the middle income trap we find ourselves in. Humans are slow learners. It takes longer for humans to reach maturity as a percentage of their lifetimes than any other species. Having had the experience as a Director of a Department at the central bank and as a Governor for several years, I am more than convinced that getting human resources in the country do what needs to be done for enterprises in the private sector and institutions in the public sector to survive in an increasingly competitive world must be a daunting challenge for human resource managers. How do we get people give their best shots when the character of the modern individuals is threatened by an economic system that has shifted from capitalism to turbo-capitalism?

How do we get people give their best shots when the feelings of authenticity have become more and more scarce? How do we get people give their best shots in times of individualization and a serious lack of true and sincere connection with each other within a team in an organization? How do we get people give their best shots if they lack insight, quickness and a can-do attitude? And how do we get people deliver what they are paid for when corrosion of character is so pervasive?

I come from a profession that has little to do with the practical aspects of human resource management. I am an economist, not a human resource professional. I have my own style of resolving human resource problems that is not necessarily the ideal one. It was 1998. I had just been appointed Governor of the Bank. The Bank’s operations were partially computerized. There

were a few senior employees who, despite having had the benefit of many sessions of training, were still averse to the use of computer. I had seized the opportunity of a meeting with staff to drive home a key point. I vividly recall having said that people hate change. The world hates change. Yet it is the only thing that has brought progress. The sophisticated quality of their cars they were driving, the electrical appliances that have greatly enhanced the quality of their lives, the advanced medical facilities that have reduced suffering were some examples of the products of “change” that successful organisations have adapted to. I had gone on to quote Harold Wilson, former British Prime Minister of the UK, “He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery.” My eyeballs rolled, on and on, on those who were averse to the use of computer at the Bank, while I stressed that we had to reinvent ourselves continually. It is not the strongest or the most intelligent that survives; it is the one that is most adaptable to change. It was compelling for us to tool and re-tool, equip and re-equip ourselves and keep on moving ahead if we had to keep earning a salary at the Bank. The bad news was that re-engineering in any enterprise requires hard decisions. The hard decision was that those who are against change would have to head towards the exit door. Guess what? Samuel Johnson said it beautifully: “When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” The same day the senior guys unpacked themselves to learn the difference between business ignorance and business tragedy.

Not long after, the same guys became the champion for change. They are still employed somewhere in the private sector, even after the age of 65. They turned out to be winners. Winners are often losers who have evaluated themselves.

CEOs, Heads of Departments/Divisions and Human Resource Managers often face the extremely difficult task of identifying what one is best capable of doing. I have seen how an established system have often labelled people possessing enormous talent as “losers”. I find no better example than the Beatles. No one had ever noticed that Paul McCartney had any musical talent in his schooldays. In the 1950s, a schoolteacher in Liverpool had half of the Beatles in his class. The teacher missed it. My point here is that talent is often buried deep; it’s not lying around on the surface. But one thing the Beatles had that many individuals in Mauritius don’t have it today – the sense of sacrifice, the strong commitment to a goal, hunger for success and recognition through perseverance.

I regularly meet with CEOs of enterprises in the country and I am given to understand that complacency is a phenomenon quite pervasive in the private sector and in the public sector as well. I am often told of people who have been in their position for years. They are good at what they have been doing. They are respected. They have a likeable boss and a job that brings them distinction in society. It’s great to be in that position. Problem is that they feel too comfortable in the job and they get less vigilant. The urge for new learning evaporates and they eventually lose their edge. Once someone goes to work simply in order to work rather than to improve oneself, one becomes invariably incompetent. As CEOs, we often hear staff members saying, “This cannot be done. And that cannot be done. This is an impossible task. That is an impossible task.” Mentally, the guys are pensioned off.

In the world of athletics, the Kenyans’ refusal to discount anything as impossible is well illustrated in the game of ‘Catch the Impala’. The impala is a supremely fast animal. Run after it. The impala will stop at some stage to rest. Before you get too close, it starts running again. This stop-chase race can go on for about 40 kilometres. After that point, the impala is tired and one is able to pat it on the backside. To the Kenyans, ‘Catch the Impala’ is the ultimate test of perseverance. Mike Boit, a former Olympic 800 meters winner, once said, “When I returned home to Kenya, they actually respected me more for my ability to catch the impala than for having brought the Olympic medal.” The idea of someone running barefoot to catch a wild impala seems impossible. The Kenyan runners make the impossible possible. The power of positive thinking, rather than getting sunk into a world of impossibilities, which allows the Kenyans to go beyond what appears to be an ultimate frontier has lessons for the business world as well.

Right from the day we are born, we pick up ideas, attitudes and convictions from the world around us. Friends, parents, teachers and so many other agents sell to us their version of the truth. The one we accept, consciously or unconsciously, forms our belief as to what is possible and what is not. The problem is that many people end up accepting a 'truth' that limits rather than open up the frontiers of possibilities for them. What we need to hammer on our people is that, whether one is a business executive, an employee or someone running a sandwich shop, if anything extraordinary is to come out, then something extraordinary must go in. And if something extraordinary has to go in, then our people need to have extraordinary qualities. I am here reminded of the qualities of the Russian woman who can stop a horse in full strides. She can walk into a house on fire and come out with the beauty of a queen. So much is the hunger for success and a bold commitment to make a difference. Hunger to win, to improve and a willingness to do whatever it takes. These are the intrinsic qualities of outstanding performers. Do not ruin the raw materials in people. It takes a lot for a human resource manager to get that right. Bear in mind one thing: nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent.

May I wish you a Happy 40th Anniversary and plenty of success in your endeavours.

Thank you.
