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'SEWA' - Managing without Managers

THE concept of 'sewa' is a very important and significant aspect of Sikhism. In essence it means the provision of selfless service for the betterment of a community. Conceptually, it asks all Sikhs to give up some of their time, talents and energy to help others and their community to become better. I was able to witness this concept first hand when I attended the Sant Sohan Singh Ji Barsi in Malacca, an annual Sikh religious festival, recently. It is reputed to be Southeast Asia's largest Sikh get-together. Almost 20,000 people were there at the peak of the celebration.

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What was amazing was that the Malacca gurdwara (temple) was able to carry out its operational and administrative activities during the festival without any formal workforce or any paid staff! As an example, they were able to serve free meals to approximately 3,000 people at any one given time in a very organised manner. There was no management structure i.e. no CEO, no managers, no supervisors and yet like clockwork, everything was run very efficiently. Imagine the logistics involved in cooking and feeding 20,000 people! And yet the gurdwara was able to do it brilliantly and only with volunteers!

I was involved quite intimately in the process as I wanted to see the concept from a first-hand perspective. I found that the volunteers came from all walks of life, from lawyers to engineers to clerks and also many retirees. They just did what they were comfortable with, some with the cooking chores, some with the washing, and some with the serving. And when someone left to go to rest, somehow they were just replaced, and the work just went on. There was no one shouting orders, no one giving instructions and no one directing anyone. Some pro-active and experienced volunteers did, however, take on the role of informal supervisors which did enhance efficiency.

What is the secret to this concept of 'sewa'? In one simple word it is called faith! Faith made many Sikhs from all walks of life come from all over Malaysia to contribute their services for free. The motivating factor was very simple: they all wanted to attain spiritual fulfilment and fulfil their duties as a Sikh in doing sewa!



As I was in the midst of doing 'sewa' myself, I could not help but look at things from a management perspective. Some things that were apparent were as follows:

A The Power of Faith. As they say, 'faith can move mountains' and here I saw it with my own eyes. No job was too difficult or demanding and everyone was ever willing to help in the name of faith. Physical comfort and personal well-being was cast aside

in order to serve the community. I saw some women with tears flowing from their eyes having cut onions for almost three hours straight, which they normally would not do! Everyone just wanted to do their best without complaining.

B The Power of Intrinsic Motivation. All the volunteers were driven by intrinsic motivation i.e. motivation from within. All tasks were carried out eagerly and



proudly. They were not paid, nor were they getting any benefits. All they wanted was to receive spiritual fulfilment and enlightenment and this 'powerful motivating force' was responsible for driving them to do their tasks well.

C Informal Management Structure. I was amazed that without any formal management structure, all operational tasks were completed with minimal supervision. I actually left my work station at one time just to test the work structure. I was pleasantly surprised that within minutes of my departure, I had been replaced by someone else and the work that I was doing just went on. This led me to the thought, "Do we really need formal structures in organisations". I am sure we do, but I think all organisations can definitely learn from this and make their structures less formal.

All in all, it was an amazing experience for me. Apart from the spiritual fulfilment that I hopefully received, there were also management lessons that I took from the wonderful experience. Somewhere deep inside me, I know that perhaps the corporate world could learn a thing or two from this awesome concept of 'sewa'.



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