

View-counter view: Employee engagement and ancient Tamil literature

Literature of the Tamil language is renowned for its ancient wisdom, being more than two millennia old. Though of such antiquity, the wisdom passed on through the Tamil works is quite valid even now. Books written during the Sangam period have been grouped into three clusters, and one of them is the “*Pathinen keezhk kanakku*” or 18 small works. Though they are small in the size of verse or the number of verses, the learning they impart is quite rich and relevant. One such book in this cluster of 18 small works is *Pazhamozhi Naanuuru* or 400 proverbs. The author of this book is a renowned poet by the name of *Munurai Araiyanar*. Wisdom, ancient even at that time, was written in verse form studded with the proverb that says it in a nutshell. As the name says, the book consists of 400 verses, each explaining a time-tested proverb.

In this article, verse number 354 is being taken for analysis. The verse runs as follows:

தன்னை மதித்துத் தமரென்று கொண்டக்கால்
என்ன படினும் அவர்செய்வ செய்வதே
இன்னொலி வெற்பு ! இடரென்னை துன்னாசி
போம்வழி போகும் இழை.

When respected and accepted as own people
Following what they do, even in difficult times
Oh well spoken king! What is the harm. Sewing needle
Whither goes, thither goes the thread.

Typically, these verses are written as if they are addressed to a local king. The verse lays down two preconditions for the proverb to be applied as it is. One, people should be understood, evaluated and perhaps even tested; two, on that basis, they should be taken into the fold.

In the business scenario, this cannot be overstressed. Engaging people in an organization has to go through a rigorous process of evaluation and testing. Education, experience, attitude and usefulness to the organization for a reasonably long period are essential for a person to be engaged. As the position or the responsibilities rise up, the rigor gets tougher. If it is the leadership position managing a critical function or even the business as a whole, the choice is made after a series of vetting processes. Though in common parlance, it is denoted by an innocuous term called recruitment, the verse puts stress on the process with the word “respected.” When someone is to be engaged, it should not be out of distress or desperation but should be out of a genuine respect for their abilities and attitudes, which have been reasonably assessed.

With the first process completed, the second process is acceptance into the organization. An organization is not a bunch of people, disjoint and coexisting. It is a homogenous group of people who share a common vision and mutual respect. As every drop of water that falls in Ganga becomes Ganga itself – holy and life-giving – so also every person joining an



organization should become one with it, integral to its ethos and dreams. On the day one of joining, perhaps, the person can be a newcomer, but from the next day, he is one of the team. He is internalized as soon as possible and that marks the success of the organization. This is indicated by the term “accepted as own people.” When the employees are aligned completely with the objectives of the organization of which they are a part, they become the organization, and they represent it at all times.

When these two prerequisites are ensured, the verse says simply go by what they do. Even when the times are tough, when things are not going exactly how they should or when efforts are not giving fruit, they still go by what they think, plan and do. The third line of the verse says it quite clearly. In the lives of individuals and organizations, every action and every plan does not come to fruition. There would be difficult situations, there would be hurdles to be crossed, and there would be trying times. That should not deter the organization from placing their faith in their people since they have been duly vetted, tested and equipped to take the organization forward. Some impediments would pop up, some delays would happen, and some mid-course corrections may be taken, but all of them will have to be handled only by the people who are in and with the organization. The third line of the verse emphasizes that by saying “even in difficult times.” The team would be appreciated and even rewarded when the going is good, but the verse says to trust them also when the going gets tough since they are the ones who would tide over the tough times.

If anyone has any apprehension about the above statement, the fourth line of the verse silences such doubts. It just asks, “What is the harm?” When in the midst of adversity, where do we place our trust and hope – in a proven team or in someone who is unexposed to it? In fact, the retort in the fourth line should have been “What is the option?” However, the wisdom of the ancients has foreseen this option and discarded it in favor of “What is the harm?” There could be situations so catastrophic that the in-house team may not be equipped to resolve them, but an external expert should be engaged. There, too, the engagement of an external expert would follow the process as mentioned in line number one, and the dictum of line number two should be adhered to, as well. That is to say, engage the expert after due process, internalize them to the needs of the organization and follow their advice without reluctance.

So, that sums up: every engagement by an organization – its employees, managers, leaders and crisis experts – should be through a proper and rigorous process, followed by as-soon-as-possible assimilation into the organizational ethos and then follow what they do and advise.

Now comes the beauty of the language and its capability. The verse lays down what an organization should do with its people, but in the same breath, it also prescribes the employees similar advice.

A person seeks employment with an organization when he considers that organization to be a good, respectable one where he can blend into the team. He feels that his personal values are not antagonized by those of the organization. It is widely seen that employees of great organizations feel proud to identify themselves with their organization. More than saying their first names or surnames, they prefer to start their identity by saying, “I am with GE” or “I work for Google” or “I am from Caterpillar.” Closer to home, Tata, Birla, TVS, StanC, etc. are some of the names that people want to begin their introduction with. When a person’s value system syncs with that of the organization that he serves, when he respects it, when he is an integral part of it, he has no hesitation in putting his best foot forward in achieving its objectives. After all, they are co-created by him along with his fellow employees, and hence, they are not just that of the organization but his own, too. Thus, nothing stops him from striding toward those objectives.

To drive home the learnings, the verse culminates in a cute but powerful proverb – thread follows the sewing needle. The sewing needle and the thread are complementary to each other. Alone, they do not serve the purpose for which they are created. They become united only when they respect each other and make efforts to get united even in the face of all shakings and movements. Unless united, they serve no purpose, and when united, they bring beautiful garments. The thread follows the needle, and the needle ensures that the thread is with it all the

time. They are different by material, by construction and their strengths, but they become a team to jointly achieve, which they cannot do individually. It is such an appropriate union of people and the organization that establishes a long-sustained business model.

The illustration that forms the proverb brings out another facet of management. In a good organization where the people engage in the prescribed way and they too join the organization with the co-opted ideals, the leaders have an important role to play. As they move, so do their team members, which accentuates the responsibility on the shoulders of the leaders. They need to be sharp and clear about their objectives and ensure their team is always with them.

With the simple example of a sewing needle and thread and with simple yet sublime words, the verse in its four lines packs the time-tested and timeless wisdom of employee engagement and leadership essentials.

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