

Obligation is born in success

By R Gopala krishnan

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The vagaries of a successful business career are as mysterious as life itself. To cope with success, you have to relax and not take yourself too seriously. Apart from great qualities of head and heart, it takes good fortune to get success. With that fortune and success, you have to do something for others. Obligation is born in success.

Vijay Gokhale graduated from Calcutta and studied engineering in the UK. He joined Union Carbide as a trainee engineer, and rose rapidly. He was a copybook case of success. With 25 years' service, he was appointed as managing director at 48 in January 1984. It was his best New Year. Union Carbide was a blue chip company, having 14 plant locations and employing 10,000 people. Vijay had a lovely family, was a member of the club and was a highly respected corporate manager.

1984 turned out to be a tumultuous year for the country. In a dark act, a bodyguard assassinated Mrs Gandhi, Rajiv took her place, raising the hopes of a besieged nation. A few weeks later, a disaster struck. In Bhopal, a deadly chemical leaked from Union Carbide's factory. The matter is sub-judice and is not the subject of this article. What happened to Vijay, the person and manager, is the subject of this article.

Bhopal was the only non-US plant to manufacture this complex chemical. The plant operation was considered a tribute to Indian engineers' ability to absorb technology. For several years, the plant operation had been superb, boasting a record two million accident-free man hours. Yet, the impossible had happened. Vijay's world came crashing around him, mercilessly and relentlessly. Within 48 hours, Vijay and the top company leadership were under house arrest in Bhopal.

Law and politics took their own courses. At the centre of this maelstrom was Vijay, who, until the other day, was envied by his peers as a very competent and lucky manager. How fate had changed lives of Vijay and, even more unfortunately, the lives of several thousands of poor and affected families. The slings of outrageous fortune were arrayed against Vijay. He felt like resigning. First, it seemed an honourable thing to do; later, it was an escape from depressing jibes. An American colleague (not representing the leadership's view) said hurtfully that the Indian company had to be severed like 'an infected appendix'. Business friends indulged in insensitive humour, for eg 'are you Nathuram Godse?' When Vijay offered to help with relief work, a senior bureaucrat politely said to him: "Your visits here are an embarrassment, please do not come here."

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Then something strange happened. Vijay realised that his success had created in him an obligation. What about those families who were ruined by this disaster? What about those employees whose jobs were at stake? What about small shareholders who had invested in the company shares? How could he even think of quitting? It was just not an option.

Suddenly, Vijay became a tornado of positive work. He was consumed with the issue of compensation for the victims. He travelled relentlessly to all his units to explain the company's response. He sold company assets to partly pay for the compensation. He got his leadership team to think of how to rescue the investment of small shareholders. He faced daunting obstacles, but Vijay reminded himself that so had the efforts of many characters in history and mythology. There was only one way to go, which was forward.

No member of the top table left for over a year. They felt fully accountable for the legal proceedings. They saved the firm as best as was humanly possible. When Vijay became CEO, the company had a history of steady profits. Within four years of the sad incident, profit had plummeted to 40%. When Vijay retired after another four years, profit had reached a new peak, 110% higher than when he took over. This was after paying the company's share of compensation and disposing of half of the company!

With a moist eye, he recalls: "My most touching moment was in Cossipore factory, where I began my career. The workers had tears in their eyes. They felt I was a son of that factory, that they would do whatever was needed, but please would I lead them through this most unfortunate crisis?"

What did all this do to him as a human being? Vijay gazed wistfully at the bay beyond the Bombay gateway and said: "It brought out the humanity in me. It taught me humility. It demonstrated that obligation is born in success."