

One should take pride in challenge & performance

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TELCO (now Tata Motors) had big dreams and big plans in the 1970s. The market for trucks was booming. Waiting lists for new trucks were as long as six-to-seven years. Telco decided to expand production and build new factories near Pune. It could raise the money but it could not buy machines, equipment and dies required because imports were severely restricted and there were no suppliers yet in India. Therefore, Telco had to make the machines and dies itself. It lined up technical collaborations with European companies. However, it had to find the most critical resource — qualified and skilled people to design the machines (and new trucks) and to produce them in India. It needed thousands of such people.

The usual channels — recruiting from other firms and tapping the educational institutions — were woefully inadequate. Experienced people with these abilities were not available in India and youngsters from the institutes had no experience at all. Telco had to get the best talent — defined as youngsters willing and able to learn fast — to build its new factories in Pune. IIMs to which the best IIT graduate engineers gravitated were hunting grounds of foreign banks and MNCs in India who had good international brands, offered high salaries and occasionally foreign training and postings. Telco could not offer any of these. What it offered was a set of challenges and opportunities: the challenge of doing something not done before; the challenge to rapidly learn how to lead, innovate and get things done in tough conditions and the opportunity to make Indians proud of their country. The very best in the institutes, foregoing other financially more attractive offers, took up these challenges and joined Telco.

The institutes reported that what attracted these youngsters to Telco was the pride that their recruiters had in the mission of the company and their desire to make their country proud. The challenge was infectious. As a Telco executive said at an IIM campus: "We do not have much salary to offer you in comparison, we do have an unusual dream that could be yours too." He was utterly convincing. And the recruits followed the pied piper. The company set up systems to support the accelerated development of these youngsters on the job mostly. Thus the firm grew its factories along with a crop of highly effective managers exceeding its own requirements and several moved on to build and run other engineering firms. Telco had developed the best 'supply chain' for talent. With it, the company's leaders could dare to take on more challenges, such as developing new models of trucks to compete in global markets.

There are two points in this story that are very relevant today when companies in India are complaining they could grow only if they had the talent. The first is to be imaginative about the supply chain and widen the pool of sources that can be tapped. The second is to sell the challenge, not the salary. Pride in one's work and relish in development of capabilities are very strong attractors for the best youngsters. Indeed, employees say, in the 'best places to work' surveys conducted internationally, that they value three qualities in their companies: high trust, great camaraderie and great pride. Monetary compensation comes behind these qualities. Whereas trust and camaraderie can be experienced only when one is in the organisation, pride in one's organisation (if one has it) and in its accomplishments and opportunities, can be communicated to an outsider and to potential recruits also.