

GAUTAM NABAR

Ownership of change

When it comes to 'change' in patriarchal organizations, the promoters want their leadership to take ownership of their actions and decisions, but they themselves are unwilling to let go of their control



The idea of writing this piece came to me as I was engaging with the promoters of an organization that I was consulting. Before I proceed to detail anything more, I feel I must clarify that by "patriarchal" I wish to metaphorically represent an authority/control dimension to the reader rather than a gender one. Herein and in the context of this write-up, "patriarchal" would imply the following:

- An organization that is led by owner/proprietors or a professional.
- Decisions on all key matter as well as operational decisions that are taken by the individual leader himself/herself.
- Organization that has become comfortable executing the decisions given by their leader.
- Compliance and obedience seem to be the cultural norm in such organizations.

The Situation

I was in a meeting with the promoters of a company discussing the organization and their expectations in terms of its growth and their plans to fuel the growth. It must be noted that they had started and grown the business into a profitable and well respected organization among its customer and vendor base and larger community.

I wanted to find out exactly what they wanted me to do as they were keen on "driving the future growth through people". I was taking notes and listening on with a few questions to move the conversation to where I could understand more about their culture and the kind of systems and process they currently have and how effective they are.

I asked them what they meant by "driving growth through people". While this, to me was very encouraging and it meant something, it was essential to understand what it meant for them and how did they see it play out practically in terms of behaviors and what would be the essential artifacts of such a growth.



Me: What do you mean when you say "growth driven through people"?

Promoter 1: I mean, the people should be at the forefront of driving the organization and decisions.

Promoter 2: Also, the people, our leaders need to take up ownership of their own decisions and for their own business units and functions.

Promoter 3: We would like to take up only an advisory role and not interfere into day to day operations and decisions. Only key decisions on investment and capital expenses etc. should come to us and we will collectively decide together with the business heads.

Promoter 1: We need you to assess whether they are the ones that we can bet on and identify any development inputs that may be required for any of them.

Me: Ok. Seems fine. So, you want me to assess their competence and skill levels as business leaders. What do the leaders feel about this? Has this been discussed with them?

Promoter 1: No, we have not discussed this with them but we know that this is needed and once we tell them they will agree.

Me: What you mean is that they will do it because you have asked them to?

Promoter 1: Yes.

Everything that requires change requires time, patience, relatedness, conversations, confrontation, authenticity and ability to be vulnerable and face the impending future with openness

I left the discussion there and moved to conversing about the appraisal process that had just concluded. I learnt that like other organizations, they too followed a normalization curve wherein every business unit/function had to adhere to the fitment of the employees within the curve and only then pass it on to the promoters and HR.

I had taken this opportunity to perform a sort of diagnostic making the most of this opportunity of speaking with the promoters.

Me: What are the challenges with your appraisal process?

Promoter 1: We have had challenges with moving the process online so this year we executed it through paper forms only and ensured that the forms were filled by everyone. But a significant challenge has been for the people to adopt the normalization methodology. We have had too many iterations of sending the ratings back and ensuring it's done.

Promoter 2: Its simple. We gave people an ultimatum by when they need to close the process at their end.

Me: What happened then? Did they close it?

Promoter 2: No. We received a lot of deviations and the leaders said that they could no longer force fit their teams into the curve anymore. So we had to close the same between the three of us.

Me: What did the leaders have to say about this?

Promoter 1: The leaders were ok with it, they accepted it.

Me: How have they communicated it to their respective teams?

Promoter 2: That's the issue as well. They have said that the promoters have done it and that they (team member) should ask HR or the promoters. They just don't want to own the ratings!

Me: (smiling) Hmmm. Why should they own the ratings when you have decided for them? Seems to me they are right in escalating the issues to you. You seem to be solving their problems, for them.

Promoter 2: Hmm.

The above conversations left me thinking for days about what it was all about. I sensed a certain contradiction in the needs expressed by the promoters and their actions. Also, they were not conscious about this apparent contradiction altogether.

The Contradiction

While they (the owners) wanted their leadership to take ownership of their actions and decisions, they were themselves unwilling to let go of their control. It was evident that they were still holding on to their power and were not sharing it with their leadership. As an effect, the leadership did not feel that they were empowered to take certain decision and assumed that

certain controls and decisions continued to remain with the owners/promoters.

I am confident that the leadership of the business did not completely feel like leaders but more like managers who have been designated to perform jobs and get work done from their respective teams.

In effect, they had set themselves up exactly against what they wanted.

The unconscious manner in which what was said, gave me an impression *that the promoters did not see themselves as a part of the organization at large.* They were promoters and others were employees of the company they owned/ran. While this should not be mistaken for any high handedness, *the reality was that they were the self-designated "karta",* in their own eyes as well as the eyes of their employees.

They saw it as their duty to do what was right for the company and give decisions where resolution was required. Their decisions were accepted as the final word. What they felt was right for the company was accepted by the employees as being right as well.

What effect did this have on culture and on leadership and on people? Was my experience of the people and culture an outcome of this or was it the other way around? My immediate thoughts were to examine the probable effects on the managers and leaders of the company.

Culture

The company is a warm and friendly place to work. People are amicable and apparently have good relations with each other. There aren't any evident conflicts or differences of opinions, and even if there are, they are perhaps nestled in the mind

and not openly thrashed out. Employees comply and obey the decisions of the owners, with their business/unit leaders. A lot of feelings and emotions seem to be held in by people as there may not be a channel for expression.

The culture also seems to be highly relationship-oriented with long tenured employees clearly at advantage in terms of comfort of working and environment.

Performance orientation is not a key feature of this kind of culture.

Compliance to authority and obedience to the word of seniors is what typifies this culture.

Leadership

Managers, business unit leaders are looked up to by their team members. Years of experience and tenure are revered and respected without doubt. Compliance and obedience is implicitly (or in some cases explicitly) demanded of people. Authority is seldom questioned.

Leaders and managers are highly task-oriented and are driven to get the job done. Focus on people and development is low.

Leaders are tolerant of non-performance in view of tenure and seniority of incumbent. They would continue to take a soft stand on people.

Decision making is escalated to the higher authority and people prefer to do as told.

People

I sensed that people have a "job" or "task" oriented relationship with the organization. They come to do a job and they go home. It's transactional. People have their own purpose for why they work here and with a focus on task, people learn to "do"

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rather than “think”. They prefer following instructions rather than ideating, thinking or proposing. They leave the thinking to their seniors.

Ironically, while task orientation is high, people care for each other on a personal level and would be aware of each other’s personal matters. They share a close camaraderie with each other.

This being the case, their relationship with the owners is different and they view their owners as providers. People would work to elicit praise of their leaders or seniors as opposed to driven to excel in their work.

Also, owners are supposed to play a role of a “benevolent parent” in a way of reprimanding for mistakes as well as encouragement for good work done.

Piecing each of these together gave me a sense of the kind of organization I was dealing with and what would be the approach I would have to take. The owners now wanted to change the nature of things and way of being to gear the company for the future. They wanted accountability,

ownership and a performance driven organization (who doesn’t?) that would innovate and lead the charge into the future.

But again, the irony of it all remains that, this is what “they” wanted and it was assumed that the voice of the owner was the voice of the people. *Metaphorically speaking, the parent always knows what is good for the child and the child (wherein it is assumed, who does know any better) agrees with the opinion of the parent in a way, unconsciously facilitating this self-reinforcing paradigm in a never-ending cycle.*

Changing the narrative - The way ahead

Patriarchal organizations are all around the world, this is how we have built empires, a world of control, a world where authentic conversations are an exception, a world where we are in constant competition with each other fueled by a perennial sense of scarcity. In this high control world, we demand

objectivity and measurability in each act and task, a bottom-line oriented world, where numbers speak and you are as good as your last numbers. We are driven by results and outcomes which we are ready to achieve at any cost. We do not want deviations of any kind and strive to build predictability.

What we sometimes do not realize is that our constant insistence on results and dependence on measurability is a defense against change. Our fear of ambiguity manifests in our insistence on predictability.

So when a leader says “I want to get this done quickly” or “we need to get this done right away”, they are actually saying, “I do not want to create any ambiguity or space for anything else”. Speed is often mistaken to be effectiveness.

Nothing changes overnight; change does not happen immediately and people don’t change because they participated in an event. Leaders don’t change their mindsets because they attended an expensive program at a prestigious university.

Everything that requires change requires time, patience, relatedness, conversations, confrontation, authenticity and ability to be vulnerable and face the impending future with openness. We cannot demand change by demanding and focusing on what we have all this time. Our perspective needs to shift, our conversations must change.

We need to shift the context to abundance, that’s when we will begin to take a long term perspective. That is when we will move away from numbers and results and quarters to vision, possibility, innovation and creativity. The narrative must change and so must the story. Patriarchal organizations will find this journey difficult and if they do, they will be faced to confront a reality that they may not have noticed, exists. Whether they are ready for it is another question. But unless they do, they will only be envisaging a future without the courage to co-create it with their people. 🍌

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GAUTAM enjoys exploring dimensions of human behavior and culture in organizations and how it influences change and vice versa. His keen mind facilitates deep inquiry and his empathetic nature seeks to help people and leaders enable sustainable transformation.

✉️ → nabar79@gmail.com