

Book Review

CEO: Chess Master or Gardener? By Anil K. Khandelwal Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2018 pp. xxvi + 358 (Hard Cover)

Industrial relations do not receive as much attention as it should, both among scholars as well as practitioners of management. The book under review by Dr. Anil Khandelwal is a refreshingly welcome and scholarly endeavor by a practitioner. The author is a career banker, who joined the Bank of Baroda as a young junior officer and retired as its CEO. Dr. Khandelwal also spent time as a researcher. The book is based on personal and inside experiences of the author, as well as insights gained from his research to understand the dynamics of industrial relations strategies pursued by the top management of a leading public sector bank. The ethnographic details and the reflective analysis by the author remind us of William Foote Whyte's classic "*Street Corner Society*", describing the inner life of an Italian American Slum.

The book is methodologically rich; Part-I of the book is based on the author's longitudinal study of the Bank of Baroda (BoB) during 1956-1988, while Part-II and Part-III are based largely on his personal experiences in different senior management roles. The book uses an interesting combination of insider-outsider

approach. While the first part is an analysis of strategies and policies of six chief executive officers of BoB, the latter part is based on his personal experiences and initiatives undertaken in the top leadership positions of executive director and later as CEO of the Bank. While the author may have had access to privileged data and information, he should be applauded for using very effectively the powerful method of participant observation often used by ethnographic researchers. The author has surmounted the danger of subjectivity as a practitioner and an insider in the interpretation and analysis of data by distancing himself as a critique of industrial relations and human resource management.

The 340 pages of the book are divided into three parts and 14 chapters. The first eight chapters constituting Part-I of the book describes in detail the strategies and styles of the various CEOs in dealing with trade unions and officers' associations and the ensuing nature of industrial relations during the period between 1956 and 2000. Chapters 9 and 10 which constitute Part-II of the book is a description of the author's experiences as business head of two geographi-

cal zones of BoB and how the IR strategies and policies, or more appropriately lack of them, of the top management adversely affected the actual conduct of business development. Part-III of the book through chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 is a reflective analysis of the paradigmatic changes successfully initiated by the author as executive director and as CEO of BoB.

A very careful reading of the book, especially Part-I, suggests that the strategies adopted by the successive CEOs and the prevalent nature of industrial relations and trade union leadership in BoB have not been different from that prevailed, especially in the public sector undertakings in India during that period. The ad-hoc and centralized policies of the top management almost always influenced by the expedient wishes of the political administration and party politics created extra-constitutional power centers in the persona of the trade union leaders. The back-door access of the trade union leaders to the CEOs and the former's influence in critical personnel decisions relating to recruitment, transfer and promotion, created a relationship of convenience. The leader-centered trade unionism and the conflict-avoiding approach of the management, which the author calls the '*band aid approach*', not only made the union leaders powerful but also made the operating managers powerless. This scenario also encouraged multiplicity of trade unions (and union-rivalry), which was already fertilized by the external interference of political parties. The short-term peace-seeking strategies of the management

combined with the personal power seeking style of the trade union leaders did not allow formulation of industrial relations policies and their execution which would benefit the larger section of employees and help promote a productive work environment.

As the author illustrates lucidly in the first part of the book, Machiavellian style of divide and rule often adopted by the management survived on the personalized support of the trade union leaders which was extended in return for personal favors received by the latter. Unfortunately, neither the management nor the union leadership was interested in developing long-term IR policies which would benefit employees or the business goal of the organization. Such a scenario had the adverse effect of making the middle and lower management, who in reality run the business operations, powerless and consequently disinterested in executive administration. Indiscipline and unauthorized behavior of union leaders and activists could paralyze the shop-floor management. "...it (top management) did not take any steps to improve the discipline at the branches by any policy pronouncement that could empower the branch managers to take initiatives in restoring discipline." (p.93). The case of BoB, which is graphically described in the book, is a typical example of the many maladies that affected the public sector banking, resulting in inefficiency and taking no notice of the customer or the emerging competitive market. The most important lesson that emanates from the book is the critical role of the CEO and the need to lead by developing trust

based on well-thought out HR and IR policies with the objectives of employee engagement and excellence in organizational performance and customer satisfaction.

Part-II of the book makes a very interesting reading of the author's personal experiences and the insights drawn from the several important initiatives that he undertook in the capacity of executive director and as CEO of BoB. More importantly, many of these initiatives were taken at a time when the branch manager's authority had been hugely eroded and the trade union leveraged unchecked power, leading to chaotic situations, especially in large branches. The objective of the series of HR reforms, which started with an HR audit of the bank branches, was to integrate the disjointed functions of industrial relations with that of personnel and create an integrated human resource development function within the BoB.

The fact that despite resistance from the trade unions, the author in his leadership position was able to create and execute initiatives involving major changes in the organizational and administrative structures and hierarchy illustrates the important role of the CEO as a leader. However, bringing about such changes is not likely to be easy or without extraordinary commitment on the part of the leader. Referring to the change initiatives, the author says: "It was the most risky and traumatic period of my leadership journey. Reforms in piloting IR were not without the risk of inviting the wrath of trade unions which, for decades, had

flourished and ruled the Bank in an atmosphere and culture of mutual survival and accommodation." (p.259). The reason for his success, despite hostile responses from the union, could be explained by the fact that the objectives of the reforms remained steadfast with simultaneous focus on employee care and business development with equal importance. It is, of course, important to acknowledge the post-liberalized context of the Indian economy, which was yearning to respond to the newly recognized competitive environment.

An important lesson that can be drawn from the BoB case is that all forms of organizational changes including structural changes and introduction of innovative technologies are likely to succeed only if they are directly connecting employees and engaging employee relations. The focus of the change was also to develop formal policies and proper structures of decision making, while empowering the chain of command within management and developing trust between employees, lower/ middle management and the top leadership of the organization. The book illustrates that even in situations where wages and working conditions are settled through industry-wide awards, management of individual enterprises do have discretionary powers to motivate employees with non-financial methods such as open and speedy grievance handling, career-planning, training and development. An equally important lesson that can be drawn from the book is the need to integrate the so-called personnel functions with IR functions and ensure that they are closely aligned with

the operational mission and objectives of the organization.

All these become possible when the CEO takes direct interest in the HR and IR issues of the organization. To quote the author: "...it may not be imprudent to say that the 'business of the CEO is not to do business alone' but to also take foundational steps in building other intangibles, such as technological readiness, corporate social responsibility leadership, governance and ethical architecture, customer centricity, and most importantly, employee relations and development."

(p.319). The title of the book is an apt analogy that a leader is like a gardener, who gets involved right from seeding and weeding to harvesting of the human talent by constantly developing and nurturing human resources under his/her care.

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