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Shaking things up, for better or worse?

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Shaking things up, for better or worse?

Nine months ago

"I don't know why exactly every member of my team is always available, taking up calls, triggering mails, and listening to whatever the client says. Quite frankly, I sometimes feel like I am in some deserted torture cell. I cannot really believe a team like this exists amidst our firm's chill culture." Faiyaz almost whisper-shouted at Indrajith, his mentor, and his manager in the previous team, the Research and Development Team, at the NKC firm. NKC, a multinational firm, with a net worth of $30 billion, focussed on information technology (IT) and telecommunication.

Faiyaz had been a great team worker, a person who not only provided solutions to neck-wracking issues but whom other team members relied upon. He would always be available to help and share his knowledge; in fact, he had arranged and conducted several knowledge-sharing sessions that helped many youngsters grasp the details of the projects they were working on. But like any other team, Indrajith's team faced a downfall. He had to let go of the team members because the technology they worked on was on the verge of saturation; they didn't receive many conductive projects, and there was another team (the Network Service Group (NSG)) for which more resources were required.

Indrajith's team had a friendly and family-like culture; partying together, meeting families over dinner; and discussions that went beyond their career and into their personal interests. So, when a crisis surfaced, he ensured everyone in his team got a safe net before he himself sailed off. Though his team focussed on research and development, and the NSG team focussed on customer technical services, both had already worked on several common products, so his teammates were more than ready to join the other team, fearing the uncertainty prevailing in the current team. However, this was not the case with Faiyaz. It was not even close to three months when he called Indrajith and declared his decision to quit his job at NKC.

"I see, so it is not about the plunging opportunities outside this firm. You don't like the new team, so you are quitting?" Indrajith laid his question carefully while forking a portion of the pulao to Faiyaz' plate. According to Indrajith, Faiyaz was a fantastic resource; he had constantly brought innovation into the work process and had received patents for the same. But Indrajith was also aware that, though Faiyaz was a creative player, he had only been an individual player in all the firms he had worked for, mainly because all the firms followed a flat structure. Though Faiyaz loved the flat structure and accompanying culture, he had started to develop an interest in managerial roles.

"No, I am just saying. Just in case, if you want to transfer any of our team members to that team, just be cautious." He dropped his shoulders, exhaling a frustrated breath. " I will never recommend this team to anyone. However, it's not the reason for my decision. The work I am doing day in and day out is becoming monotonous. I need a change; I have been here for what, 8 years? in my 15-year career! I think I will grow roots if I stay longer." Faiyaz murmured, both laughed amicably, and he continued.

"Ji, my point is that we have a product, and we need to build on the quality, right? But none of them are even able to understand and buy it. Instead, the team constantly

thinks about a workaround to solve the current problems and never thinks about the sustainability of a single solution they are coming up with. And on top of it, they are celebrating these workaround solutions as an achievement. My goodness, I will go crazy if I stay longer. Thank God, I got an offer from Inforcomm India."

Two cups of coffee came for them, distracting the thick air of Faiyaz' disappointment with the current team.

"Right, whatever works for you, Faiyaz." Indrajith patted his back cheerfully, though he was uncertain of this sudden decision taken by Faiyaz.

Sudden or desperate? Joining a relatively smaller Indian-based start-up with very little international presence despite being one of the biggest brands in India in the scheme of networking technologies. Of course, Faiyaz was given the position of Staff Engineer (technical team lead), which is not possible in NKC in the near future due to the structural barriers that came along with the flat structure.

Still, Indrajith wasn't really sure how Faiyaz would like the new firm. He knew Faiyaz too well for so long. Faiyaz was the kind of person who wouldn't be deterred by whatever challenges came his way in converting his ideas into reality. Indrajith made sure that Faiyaz wasn't disturbed much by tight deadlines, knowing the kind of value he brought to the team. According to Indrajith, NKC was the best fit for his attitude and skillset. The firm offered a conducive culture that is suitable for creative brains like Faiyaz. Anyone could initiate ideas and individual players were sometimes paid more compared to their bosses, and Faiyaz was one of them. "There is no way he will get the same freedom in the Indian firm where he is moving on. I hope he doesn't regret the decision soon." He said to himself before sipping the last of his coffee.

Present:

Faiyaz joining the new firm:

Inforcomm India, an Indian-based IT firm, specialised in manufacturing networking equipment and allied network software. The firm existed for over a decade with a net worth of $300 million. The software delivery followed a waterfall approach in which the design was followed by development and further followed by testing. The testing team was further broken into automation, manual, and framework development teams. Faiyaz was appointed as the technical team lead for the framework development team, consisting of seven engineers working under him. The framework development team developed and maintained the frameworks upon which the automation teams would automate the test cases.

Breaking the mould:

Soon after joining the team, he was first stunned at the level of disorganisation in the work process, starting with the process requests communicated from other teams. He immediately wanted to communicate a number of changes, which had to be incorporated into his team. All the team members assembled for the meeting, and Faiyaz took control from the start. He openly discussed the issues existing in the current process.

He pointed out, "None of the requests made by the other teams are documented. They just mail the request; our team should randomly perform all the tasks and clear the requests. Going forward, all requests should be documented and streamlined. I have created a platform for the other teams to upload their requests. This has been communicated to them as well. So, you don't have to waste your time negotiating with them over the mail. This also ensures that you have accountability for what you are working on, and I can ensure that you receive sufficient recognition for the kind of efforts you put in." While all his teammates nodded superficially, they were internally perplexed looking at the change of process. Usually, they would receive task requests from all levels of hierarchies, and they were not confident that this new process would be followed by all the hierarchical levels.

Next was the agile process. The firm was still into the waterfall model, but Faiyaz thought it was necessary to shift the work process to an agile methodology. "In connection with the shift towards the agile process, there will be daily sync-up meetings at 11 am, every day. I will also be available for all the meetings," he insisted; again, there was only silence apart from his voice booming in the meeting room. He understood that his team members were not really buying the ideas, but he was sure that once all the processes were implemented, they would understand the significance of these changes.

Much to his anticipation, the team members were not receptive to the daily meetings. There would always be some excuse for not attending these meetings. Initially, daily meetings, though planned only for 20 minutes, went on for up to 60 minutes, which was again another strong reason to avoid the meetings. Also, individuals who turned up for the meeting told him, a bit delicately, that they were not able to finish their daily tasks because of the time consumed in the daily meetings.

"This is just an initial hiccup, and every process has to go through it. Only if we keep working on it will we be able to improve the efficiency," Faiyaz muttered, dismissing even the thought of erasing the daily sync-up meetings.

Also, the next day, his team received formal mail, unlike the usual informal mail that bounced between their boss, i.e., Faiyaz, and them. The mail strongly enforced the necessity of the team members attending the daily meetings, and there was also an underlining message that read, "Only if you attended the meetings, your efforts could be properly validated, and work can be accordingly delegated." Also, he made sure that he was present in every meeting, despite the low participation from his team. He also immediately enrolled and completed a scrum master certification to authenticate his ideas, and he didn't shy away from communicating the same to his team members. Eventually, the duration of the sync-up meetings was reduced to 20 minutes, and all the team members started to actively discuss their previous day's work, upcoming tasks and impediments. In addition to documenting all these efforts, the team slowly developed tribal knowledge, i.e., knowledge shared among themselves. They became more open to communicating their issues, and their accountability drastically increased.

Further, Faiyaz proceeded to experiment with the type of work every person was responsible for. He incorporated higher levels of work specialisation. Every member was given a particular domain to own. To reduce monotony derived from work specialisation, he has also initiated another move. The team members had to have a constant learning curve; to attain this, they could take up certifications, and more importantly, once every week, there would be knowledge sharing sessions, and team members had to hold seminars on their new learnings in a round-robin fashion. Simple changes like informal team gatherings for quick discussions and

the placement of a white board near their workspaces enabled an organic flow of knowledge. His usual slogan was "Gain all, lose all; Never give reasons, provide specific problem statements and solutions will find their way; Think like an ideator."

In the meantime, he also found that there was a significant mismatch between the other teams' demands and his team's deliverables. For example, his team members complained that they were given too little time by other teams to complete a task and weren't provided with proper knowledge of the demands. This led Faiyaz to further initiate a few changes. He made sure that the other teams gave a knowledge-sharing session on their projects and their requirements. Before gathering for the session, the person who took up this task first needed to develop meta-knowledge about the protocols on which they had to work. This would help both teams to have a basic understanding of the requests when they communicated. With a proper understanding of the domain and the knowledge gained through knowledge sharing sessions, members of both teams would negotiate the man hours required to finish the task. This process was amicably accepted by the teams, and in fact, it had tremendously enhanced the efficiency of task completion. In addition, this had helped his team members improve their knowledge not only based on the firm's requirements but also holistic knowledge about the entire domain.

In addition to the work performance outcomes, Faiyaz noticed several behavioural modifications among his team members. Some of his reflections included, "They complained less and started to come up with suggestions, ideas, and solutions for issues that had been rooted for many years. They started to work like a tribe; they knew when to call someone in the team, when not to disturb, whom to ask for a specific task-related issue, more importantly, they started to argue with me and challenge me, which only helped the team drive innovative solutions."

One of his subordinates, Jaishwani, was sipping coffee at the office café along with another colleague from a different team. Jaishwani was all praise for her team lead. "He has not only transformed the business process of our team but also changed our entire outlook towards our work. I feel like I am more rounded; I know the technology better than many from other teams." She immediately winced and smiled apologetically. "Didn't mean you, just my opinion. You may have a different opinion about our team, though."

Her colleague's eyes shrunk and brows knitted together in an accusing sign, but only for a second. She then just smiled and patted her back. "That's okay. We get a little carried away when we get immediate success." She winked, filling the embarrassment with a lighter tone. "But I cannot deny your statement, though. Your team is always on the edge; sometimes even I have thought of asking for an internal transfer to your team. However, I am married and have kids, unlike you all. You all are a young bunch, mostly unmarried, and so Faiyaz can make you work like this. I really don't think I can exert so much time for the team. So, I am happy wherever I am."

Jaishwani felt an immediate urge to retaliate that their team even had a policy not to call or disturb during non-work hours, which actually attenuated the work-life struggle, but she remained quiet. Perhaps she knew that her friend might think that she was just exaggerating their team's culture, though it was absolutely true.

Tipping point leading to Faiyaz' drastic move:

The conflict between Faiyaz's team and the automation team slowly started to brew. The thin ice holding Faiyaz's tolerance broke when his team's performance didn't

meet expectations. After several discussions, the project manager was convinced that the new framework and the processes incorporated by Faiyaz's team may benefit the firm as a whole. The agility promised by Faiyaz's team was convincing, as the team had already shown positive outcomes. Though the automation team was sceptical about using the framework developed by Faiyaz's team, they couldn't resist the changes. However, their reluctance was reflected in several instances. Whenever Faiyaz organised a knowledge sharing session, he could only find a few participatnts from the automation team. Also, with the flexible work arrangements, most of the employees opted for online mode to attend the sessions. However, the online presence of the employees didn't result in active participation during the sessions. Faiyaz also recalled a criticism made by the automation team lead.

Incident with another Staff Engineer in an automation team:

The new recommended framework was built based on the latest open-source tools. Now that the migration was needed from the old framework to the new framework, retrofit was what was suggested by Meera, Staff Engineer, Automation Team (team lead of the automation team), but Faiyaz bluntly denied the retrofit idea, stating that the old codes didn't follow the software coding guidelines, and therefore, the old framework had a monolithic architecture that was more rigid and not flexible.

Meera again claimed that retrofit was the only possible solution as they had already exerted too many efforts, which may go in vain if they were not using the old system. Also, she quickly pointed a technical defect in Faiyaz team's new framework. "Though your architecture is robust, yours is tightly coupled, and it will take too many man hours and other resources to fit the old into this tightly coupled system". She said, assertively.

However, at the end of the meeting, Meera couldn't argue much about why they shouldn't focus on rewriting their codes because Faiyaz had stated with evidence that the new system was loosely coupled[*] and any component could fit into the new system. "But the only issue is that all the components should follow the protocols. This will provide sufficient robustness for the entire framework. This is why I am insisting on the automation team rewriting the old codes before integrating them into the new system." He concluded, making sure that the automation team agreed to rewrite the codes of those components that are to be integrated with the new system.

[*]When the components of the architecture can function with little dependency from other components, then the architecture is considered loosely coupled, which is preferred across the software industries.

Much to his dismay, the automation team often found reasons to avoid using the new framework to write their scripts, even though they had affirmed their commitment to work in the new framework. This has led to shortcomings in the outcomes as well. He was not happy to not see the envisioned outcomes for his team, as the automation teams were not understanding and implementing the changes, though they agreed to do so in the meetings. Since his team's and automation team's outcomes were intertwined, his team's

outcome plummeted because of the automation team's resistance to change. This in turn affected the morale of Faiyaz's team. The team, consisting of young engineering graduates, lacked motivation to perform even routine tasks. Faiyaz therefore took this issue to the project manager. It became very much clear to Faiyaz that his team's efforts alone wouldn't suffice for the conversion of the team's efforts into outcomes. The automation teams should be fluid enough to accept the required changes and transform their workflow and processes to even anticipate any positive outcomes. At a meeting where he deliberately arranged to showcase his team's efforts in transforming the work processes, he fortunately had the chance to meet the Vice President (VP), with whom he got along well. Both Faiyaz and the VP were new to the organisation, and they had worked for multinational corporations with similar work processes before they joined this firm. Perhaps, the VP was also of the view that automation and an agile approach are the way of the future. In fact, to know more about Faiyaz's potential, the VP made himself available during many of the meetings that Faiyaz arranged, and to his surprise, he found that significant parallel teams were constantly missing during these meetings. In fact, in an informal conversation with Faiyaz in his office, the VP offered some suggestions for handling resisting people.

"Faiyaz, good that you are bringing in needed changes. And your team is showing great numbers. The organisation needs some transformative changes. However, I must tell you that most of the managers here have started their careers and worked their way up through several hardships. You must give their efforts full credit. You might be young and dynamic, and so can your team. But you cannot expect all the teams and their managers to have the same traits. That too, when it is a fact that these managers were the people who built this firm from scratch. I am sure there will be reservations from their side, even if your ideas sound good. You have to influence them, Faiyaz. You must pull the strings, but very slowly. You cannot force your ideas into their throats. That's the challenge. Otherwise, it will never work."

Faiyaz sulked at the idea of influencing people to do things that were only constructive for the firm. "As if these managers will even listen to what I envision." He muttered to himself. According to him, if all his ideas were incorporated, employees, including all the managers, would definitely have a piece of the pie. Also, he had pursued all possible tactics to influence his team, and now he was really tired of doing it all over again for all the parallel teams. "If they are dead as a dodo, that's their problem," he vented internally. But he had already worked out a plan to incorporate his ideas. Quickly collecting some of the documents, he walked into the project manager's office. Right now, all he wanted was to be on the negotiation table and somehow get the deal for his team.

Faiyaz carefully laid out his plan to the project manager. "As you already know, I am trying to convert my team into a 3-dimensional performance team. They are not only developing frameworks for the automation team, but they have also been learning both automation and manual testing for the last six months. I will mail you their certifications and other learning efforts. Since they are now well equipped with all three work tasks, I would like to expand my team's focus to automation and manual testing as well. But I might require four additional team members to join my team so that the team doesn't get stressed with the increasing workload."

After a few days, the project manager and Faiyaz again met in a dinner meeting. Perhaps the project manager also understood the ulterior motives behind Faiyaz' request beyond the reasons he had just communicated.

The project manager articulates how he thinks about the situation and the meeting:

I could really see the reasons. Number 1: His ideas were not well received by the other team leaders, especially the automation team, though they were very much receptive to the new ideas. In fact, one team member from the automation team personally e-mailed and requested me to look for opportunities to fit him into Faiyaz's team. Though the firm allowed internal transfers, I brushed this idea off as it sounded like further ramifications and conflicts between the team leaders. Number 2, he wanted the automation team to acquire knowledge about the new framework and use it as it might save their time and may help both teams achieve their team targets. However, the automation team was often trying to go back to their old framework and processes whenever the new ones had issues, even if they were minor. In sum, Faiyaz wanted close monitoring of the people who were working in the new framework. When I took this issue straight to VP, he was receptive to Faiyaz's idea throughout the conversation, ignoring the potential deviant consequences if any of these ideas failed. Only two weeks passed, and it was surprising to see VP's mail directly addressing me to proceed with Faiyaz' idea.

So, I called Faiyaz and had a conversation. "You can proceed with what you have suggested. I will ask the HR team to coordinate with you on the job specifications and other qualifications you expect from the candidates. Let the automation team do what they are doing, and you can run parallel with them. Let's see if there are any differences in efficiency though I don't doubt the effectiveness of both teams. But I also hope that you have mapped out all the implications of this change".

"You very well know about the kind of business results I am bringing to my team and to the firm. I don't think there will be any harm in bringing in new people and working three-dimensionally." Then, Faiyaz also added, "Being a tech firm, we cannot keep on running the same technology and frameworks, which are almost obsolete. We need to trigger these changes even if they taste like bitter pills."

While Faiyaz left the place with an assuring smile, his project manager was still doubtful and worried whether this move would create any further conflicts between the team leaders.

Disappointments galore:

Meanwhile, he was constantly looking out for ways to evaluate his team's performance on a daily basis. So, Faiyaz prepared a team performance dashboard that displayed the daily, weekly, and monthly targets, individual progress and issues, and tasks overdue, to name a few. When he learnt from his project manager that the management was also keen on developing a firm-wide dashboard to understand the business value generated by the workforce, he was thinking of how best to exhibit this dashboard to the management. Faiyaz worked with the system administration team to set up a TV dashboard just adjacent to the VP's office, therefore increasing the visibility of the dashboard. It provided a map for his team to focus on their tasks, work on their overdues, understand the key performance indicators, and, more importantly, the team members received appreciation from several other employees since their efforts were gauged and made visible.

During a general meeting, the VP was insisting on bringing an external team to build a firm-wide dashboard. Faiyaz quickly intervened, of course, masking his disappointment. "Did you happen to have a look at our dashboard? It has all the components that you have just mentioned as requirements. The functionality can be expanded across the firm if required."

"Oh, I should have a look at it too, yes. " He said, briskly, but he was still talking about bringing in a set of contract employees to develop a firm-wide dashboard. And the VP went on to subsequent topics on the agenda.

Faiyaz was wondering why his efforts weren't really received. Days passed and he couldn't put a finger on it, but he started to find his work a little more uninteresting, day by day. He also realised that his teammates would feel the same. Since he had the structural power to constantly motivate them, he incorporated a few reward schemes; he swiftly changed quarterly awards to spot awards. But this transition was not easy work. He had to convince everyone, from his project manager to HR people.

"Why do you want to change the quarterly awards? I have been here for a decade, and nobody ever complained about the quarterly awards," his project manager asked him, sipping a cup of coffee.

"It is all about the intensity. The team is transforming on several levels; you very well know about it. By this time, you may also know that many other teams and their managers are coming with various criticisms, most of which are mere countermeasures to not accept the changes." His project manager just shrugged while Faiyaz continued. "My team needs to be motivated to take up the challenges I throw at them. Spot awards will be a great motivation for them. They will be instantly recognised, and that is very much crucial when I need my team members to take responsibilities on their shoulders during a transformation. I need their support right now, not after three months."

His project manager took a deep breath and nodded. "I will revert after having a discussion with the management." He filed out of Faiyaz' cabin without giving further hope. Faiyaz mumbled over a bite of the sandwich, "Hope they pick their brains soon from the deep hole."

Later, much to his disappointment, the HR person quoted several clauses; in a nutshell, the policies didn't allow him to convert quarterly rewards to spot rewards in a short period of time. Therefore, he had to spend his own financial resources to provide spot rewards for his team members. According to him, his team members were far more deserving than this. But, on the other end of the rope, this was not well appreciated by the project manager, though there were visible performance improvements in the team, for which the project manager himself was also hugely appreciated by the management.

Now that his team members are recognised, he must immediately address his lack of motivation at work. He needed a challenge to work on, and it just fell on his feet. There were two network operating systems for two different products untill now. The old framework allowed the teams to automate their test cases based on only one OS, but they comfortably projected that the test cases would work on the other OS as well. However, when managers started to use them, they realised that the test cases were not compatible for both OS. Therefore, finding test cases to be ineffective, teams had to manually test the software, which led to the delay in software delivery. Since Faiyaz was well experienced with developing frameworks solely, he started to work on this issue personally beyond work hours. He recalled Sundar

Pichai's dialogue in an interview where he was talking about how he managed to develop a chrome engine when his boss, Eric Schmidt, the CEO, was hesitant about the idea. "How did I do it? I didn't tell people for a while, I had a small team and worked on it." – Sundar Pichai.

Since Faiyaz wasn't even that lucky to have a small team to work on creative problems, he himself took charge without formally communicating with anyone in the firm. He made changes to the new framework so that the same test cases could be executed across different Operating Systems. When his idea was ready to be exhibited, he proposed the Proof of Concept in front of the entire workforce, which included his teammates, many managers, and the VP. Understanding the rigour and compatibility, horizontal teams and their managers stopped challenging his vision. Though he didn't receive any criticism after the successful presentation of his POC, other teams were very slow in incorporating the changes he proposed. Also, the new framework was again not used by many managers, despite knowing its high compatibility compared to the older frameworks.

Over a bowl of cold, unappealing noodles, Faiyaz was mindlessly twirling the noodles. His mind wandered around these nine months of his dedicated efforts. He felt really frustrated that his work had never been validated; now he was on the fringes of dissatisfaction. And above all, he had even gotten the nod to expand his team. Right now, it would be absolutely fatal for the team if he thought of quitting, or was it time for him to reevaluate his decision about joining this firm? At least, he could save his teammates and new employees from this constant trouble of resistance to change. Or should he have asked for the L2 level - project managerial role, which would have given him the hierarchical power to implement the changes he wanted? He had also observed that his work experience and skill set matched the project manager's profile more than the Staff Engineer's position, which he had been offered by the firm.

He felt his life so convoluted, just like the sloppy, slithery, tasteless noodles that was sitting in front of him for more than an hour.

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