Interdependence in the Corporate World

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In a complex business environment no organization is independent. Everyone is either dependent or interdependent.

ANY BUSINESS, BE IT A MANU- facturing concern or a service provider, regardless of where it functions from, operates in a complex environment. It is like a giant circus, with numerous players performing their parts. Some shows turn out to be great, some mediocre, while others are flops.

Imagine an ocean where billions of living organisms live and die each day. But they all do so under a massive umbrella one that is not visible the umbrella of interdependence. Each living organism not only contributes to the entire ocean and its ecology, it in turn requires several other elements present in that environment to enable it to survive, procreate, and then die. There is no doubt that they operate under some mammoth scheme of things, which is delicately balanced and operates like a great orchestra, conducted by a maestro.

Cast your thoughts for a moment about human life. A child is born-it is dependent upon its mother at first, and then both parents. It is simply not capable of doing things on its own. It is too fragile and unprepared to take upon itself the task of survival.

The parents nurture the child and help it to grow. The tasks immediately after birth remain fiercely focused upon fulfilling the physical needs of the baby -food, warmth, water, and the like. Along with this comes lots of parental love a necessary ingredient for fulfilling the baby’s emotional needs. There is thus almost total dependence. The baby cannot survive on its own.

The years roll by, and the baby grows up. It begins to learn to take care of itself. It becomes capable of drinking and eating food, wearing clothes, brushing teeth, having a bath, and so on. The child also begins to explore the world around him. The dependence is there, but it has palpably diminished. The need for TLC (tender

loving care), never ceases, though. This dependence will remain for ever.

As the child matures, he or she be gins to shed the umbilical cord of dependence, and learns to be independent, in all matters except money and love. He/She still depends upon the family to provide these necessities. Soon he becomes an adult, and starts earning. Dependence on the family is very little now. Those young adults who are fortunate will continue to receive emotional support from their families. The other support mechanisms wither away, because they are no longer required.

Well, this isn't entirely true, because it fails to take into account another factor which has been manifesting itself during this transformation from dependence to independence. In reality, the young adult has merely transformed to a state where he may no longer be dependent upon his family, but has become dependent upon several new agencies that have begun to interact with his/her life. For instance, he now depends upon his employer, his colleagues, his customers, his suppliers, his professional acquaintances, and a myriad of other people, mostly from outside the sphere of family.

So what has happened here? The dependence has merely shifted from a smaller sphere [family] to a larger sphere [world). For sure, the nature of the dependence is considerably different from that experienced during childhood and adolescence. To distinguish one from the other, we call it interdependence.

Yes, the individual is independent, but it is also true that he/she has to de- pend upon others to preserve that independence. And the same is true for all forms of life on earth. The most independent person can remain independent only if the phenomenon of interdependence works well. The lesson to be learnt from this is that no one, and I mean absolutely no one, is independent. You are either predominantly dependent or interdependent.

So why should this matter to businesses, corporations, institutions, and governments? Because businesses, corporations, institutions, and governments are no different. It's a laugh that many organizations (never mind which category they belong to), think they are independent.

Hey, it's simply not possible to remain independent any more. The whole world is too intertwined for any organization to think that way. So what is this phenomenon of interdependence in the organizational context? Here are some simple home truths:

You stock and sell automobiles. You depend upon the automobile manufacturer. You put up capital, and borrow some from the bank. You depend upon the bank. The bank equally depends upon you.

You operate in a particular geographical area. You depend upon the business environment prevailing in that area. (Just ask your friends from the electronics, commodities, and textile businesses in town, and they will tell you enough to earn a Ph.D. in dependence).

You decide to maintain stocks near your customers, and hire a storage firm. You depend upon that company's people to take care of your goods. You decide to move offices. You depend upon the telephone and utility companies to reconnect the services.

You want some flowers delivered to a client. You depend upon the florist to deliver on time.

You want your customers to be satisfied. You depend upon your employees to do that.

The list is endless. Just spend a few minutes and you can add several items to this list. How then, can anyone arrogantly assume that his/her organization is independent? And this is equally applicable to governments and nations. A nation depends upon its citizens for progress and stability. And so on.

If the phenomenon of interdependence is true, it stands to reason that every organization has to strive very hard to maintain professional and pleas ant relationships with all its constituents. Only then can an organization expect to provide and receive excellent service at all times, and extraordinary service when push comes to shove.

What does this entail? Well, for starters, it is necessary that top management educates itself and then all others in the organization what this interdependence is all about. Having done that, it should focus on hiring people who either believe in this philosophy, or are willing to learn about it.

So how does an organization that respects interdependence behave? What are its characteristics?

■ People (teaboys to top executives) are humble

■ Staff are encouraged to be curious

■ Customers are treated with kid gloves

■ Employees are treated as real assets, not liabilities

■ Suppliers (service providers) are treated as professionally as customers and employees

■ Information (results, profits, problems) is freely shared with all employees

■ Senior management devotes equal amount of time to customers, employees, and service providers

■ The organization solicits, and immediately acts upon, feedback from customers, employees, and service providers

■ Phone calls are returned, promptly and courteously, to all parties I

■ Decisions are communicated to everyone without delay



What do you experience instead? If you are a customer, you are considered a

nuisance that has to be tolerated. If you are an employee, you are totally dispensable. You will be the last to know about big changes taking place in the organization. Stuffy fellows will hurry in and out of conference rooms, and not breathe a word to you about things that will directly affect you, like a hand grenade about to explode in your face. All this, of course, is in the name of corporate well being. Naturally, you the employee do not figure in these discussions except as an expend- able commodity. What a farce!

Worse will befall you if you are a service provider. You are a real pariah, and will be unhesitatingly treated like one. Your letters will elicit no response. You aren't even entitled to the courtesy of an acknowledgment. What happens to your repeated phone calls? Ah, that is another matter. Everyone at your customer's end is so busy that no one has the time (or inclination) to return your call. After all, you are merely one among so many suppliers. And the word supplier or vendor is a four letter word. Until someone wakes up and decides that your services are required. Suddenly, you will receive rapid-fire phone messages. If you don't return the call within a reasonable time like 30 minutes], you are a lousy supplier, who doesn't care for his customers. After all, what other work do you have?

Have you heard this refrain – 'I have been trying to contact you all these days. Where have you been? Which makes you wonder what this pompous fellow is talking about. You called him twenty times during the last three months, and he didn't care to return even one of those calls, and here he is asking where you were fifteen minutes after calling your office!

A proposal that has been languishing in a cold steel cabinet that resembles those you find in a morgue for several months suddenly leaps to life. Act, act immediately, I need it now damn it, comes the sharp response from a prospect or customer who you thought had died of brain damage.

Since starting up our company, I have been faithfully logging our calls to our customers and prospects. We have also been logging the response times. Like Company 'A': number of times called during two weeks-8. No of calls returned NIL. Person called, and person to whom we spoke. Of course, you can see this fellow's picture in the newspaper, and you know he is in town alright.

It's hilarious, reading this log. I read it when I feel tired and it immediately works like a cup of great tea. It perks me up, and I am ready to make a few more calls (that are also unlikely to receive the courtesy of a response). Some day, I intend

publishing these statistics in a book, entitled “The A to Z of Arrogance’.

Jokes apart, corporations that don’t understand that they are interdependent, and suffer from the “Why should I care?” cancer, will find their customers, employees and service providers letting them down in the not too distant future. Why not take a look at your own company and measure yourself against some or all of these behavior patterns? But that requires humility. Now that’s tough, isn’t it?