Folklore for managers

A collection of folk stories from South Asia to inspire managers

For more than 10 years, MDF South Asia has been conducting management training in the region, including in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Thailand and Indonesia and other countries.

In enhancing the management capacities of our clients, we believe that a manager needs more than technical skills and methods. Good management is about opening the heart; it is about inspiration of oneself and of others. The folk stories in this booklet are full of wit and wisdom. They can be retold and the reflective questions may be used by trainers, facilitators, teachers and lecturers to open people's hearts and minds to the rich cultural values these tales represent. May they be an inspiration to managers in South Asia.

MDF South Asia is part of the worldwide operating MDF Training and Consultancy bureau, with offices in the Netherlands, Belgium, Tanzania, Vietnam, Central Africa and Sri Lanka.

Our mission is to enhance management capacities of professionals and organizations in the development sector by providing participatory training and consultancy services.

MDF
Training & Consultancy

This edition was published on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of MDF South Asia and is not for sale.

Design by: K+VL Reclame

MDF South Asia 10 years of excellence

Folklore for managers

A collection of folk stories from South Asia to inspire managers



MDF South Asia 10 years of excellence

MDF
Training & Consultancy

Collection and edited by Susanne van Lieshout

Folklore for managers

'Folklore for Managers; a collection of folk tales from South Asia to inspire managers' was published by MDF SA (Sri Lanka) in January 2008, on the occasion of its 10th anniversary. The publication can not be sold, nor can it be reprinted without permission from MDF South Asia. The stories and questions can be used and retold by trainers, workshop facilitators, teachers, lecturers or anyone who wishes to use their wisdom to inspire them or others.

Acknowledgements

The editor wishes to thank Lerins Peries for his creative idea, and acknowledges valuable contributions to the management links by Martien van Asseldonk. Furthermore, thank you to Inez UsLeyanege, Terrence Asirvadem and M. Sobana Cassiere for their editorial support. Lastly, a big thank you to MDF SA's clients and ex-course participants from the South Asian region for being a source of inspiration for this booklet.

Note from the editor

This publication contains folk tales from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Some of the stories have been adapted by the editor. The management links expressed in the book are those used in management training sessions of MDF South Asia.

'Good leadership comes from the heart and considers the hearts of others…'

Table of contents

	Page
The Crab Family – Sri Lanka	6
Makato and the Cowrie Shell – Thailand	9
Sweet as Sugar – Bangladesh	12
The Big Fat Hen – Asia	15
The Loyal Mongoose - India	18
The Camel Heart – Pakistan	21
The Inn Owner – Afghanistan	24
The Clever Mouse-Deer - Indonesia	27
The Golden Cucumber – Sri Lanka	30
The Heron Story – Maldives	33
The Lion Makers – India	36
The Clever and the Foolish Woman – Bangladesh	39
Chicken Soup - Afghanistan	42
The Royal Journey to Heaven – India	45
The Merchant-Prince on the River - Pakistan	48
The Poor Fat Cook – Sri Lanka	51

Foreword

Once upon a time there was … a king, a witch, a dragon or even a frog. All kinds of creatures feature in ancient legends and folk tales. Good or bad, ugly or beautiful, rich or poor; all are there except for 'the manager'. Managers do not feature in the tales and stories from different times. Or…maybe they do! The kings, merchants or animals in our folk tales are all managing their respective kingdoms, businesses and animal rights. They may not be called managers, but the need to use their resources in a systematic common sense manner to achieve a particular goal, in other words 'management', was there. The stories in this book, collected from all over South Asia, are not explicitly about management, yet they represent rich cultural and managerial values that are useful to managers. To inspire them and their staff.

We have bound these stories to celebrate the 10th anniversary of MDF South Asia. With 10 years we may not be as old as these stories, but we definitely have the ambition to last much longer. An ambition that we can only fulfill with the help of dedicated staff and the continued trust of our clients. In the next decade we set out to retain and reinforce this trust by continuing the provision of relevant and ever improving management services, tuned to the specifics of our clients in South Asia.

We look forward to working with you again and hope you will all enjoy this booklet,

Yours sincerely,

Mike Zuijderduijn
Director MDF South Asia

The Crab Family

Sri Lanka

On the sunny beaches of Tangalle, a fishing village in Sri Lanka, there lived a crab with her family. One beautiful morning, the mother crab and her young daughter went for a long stroll on the beach by the sea. The crashing waves made lovely music to their ears. The palm trees waved to and fro in the breeze. There were a lot of happy people sitting under the palms and watching the scene. The crab mother became self-conscious. So many people were watching her and her daughter taking a walk on the beach. She looked at her daughter and was suddenly horrified by the way she was walking. She imaged how the other people would look at her, how awful. 'Girl', she said sternly, 'why do you shuffle sideways when you walk? You look funny, so graceless. And all these people are watching. You must learn to walk straight without going sideways!'

The little girl crab was deeply hurt, she retorted at once: 'Well mother, I was only copying you, I thought it was the way to walk since that is the way you walk. If my walk is not nice, walk straight yourself first and I will do as you do'. The mother crab stopped walking sideways the way she had always done. She concentrated and made a big effort to walk straight. She fell down and tried again. She was swaggering so funnily that the people on the beach started to laugh about this silly crab who tried to walk straight.

Questions

- Was the crab's daughter right to ask her mother to walk straight first?
- Have yo u ever been asked to change something you were unable to? How did it feel?
- What does this story tell you about criticising other people?



Management link

As managers, you will have to give regular feedback to your staff. One of the golden rules of giving feedback is that the receiver of the feedback should be able to do something with the feedback. Giving feedback is not the same as giving advice. Criticising people for who they are, how they speak or how they look only hurts people's feeling, which brings us to another important rule of giving feedback: good feedback does not offend. Constructive feedback allows a person to develop and grow and to make his or her own decision on how to change.

Topics

Giving feedback, giving advice, inability to change, realistic target setting, empathy.

Makato and the Cowrie Shell

Thailand

Once upon a time there was a boy named Makato. He was an orphan and had no friends or relatives to take care of him. Because he had to make his own living, he did all kinds of work; chopping wood, feeding pigs, clearing and cleaning. He did not mind working hard and although his wages were small, he was satisfied with his life.

He was only 4 when his mother had died, but he remembered some stories she had told about the kind-hearted King of Sukhothai. He decided he wanted to meet the King. One day, Makato was helping a friend to find food for elephants. He found so many branches that the friend offered him a job to become assistant to the old mahout of the King. He worked hard, cleaning elephant sheds and finding food. One fine morning, Makato's patience and hard work got rewarded; he was to accompany the King's elephant! As the King mounted the elephant, in his splendid shiny costume, he dropped a tiny cowrie shell. Makato picked it up and held it out to the King, who told him to keep it. Makato could not believe his luck. At that time, the people of Sukhothai used cowrie shells as money, and although one cowrie had very little value, Makato wanted to use it wisely. He went to the market where the seeds of many different plants were sold but he quickly realized that with one cowrie he could not even buy the smallest bag of seeds. Then he noticed the lettuce seed selling stall. 'Lady, if I dip my finger into a pile of seeds, can I take the seeds that stick to my finger for one cowrie?' he asked. 'Well, why not', the woman answered, amused by his suggestion. Makato carefully scraped the seeds of his finger and planted them. He watered them every day, until the garden was covered in fresh, green lettuce. Proud as he was, he wanted to offer the King some fresh lettuce.

'Where did you get these, my boy?' the King asked surprised and Makato told him the story about the cowrie. The King was impressed by so much intelligence and industry and offered him a good job at the palace.



Questions

- Why do you think the lettuce sales women agreed to let Makato dip his finger in the seeds?
- Have you ever asked someone a favour? Was your favour awarded?
- What can you learn from this story from Makato's point of view?
- What do you think about the King's perspective?

Management link

Apart from being a dedicated, hard worker, Makato has clearly shown initiative and creativity to make something of his life. With a few small lettuce seeds he managed to do well for himself. The story nicely illustrates a famous Afghan proverb: 'one who doesn't appreciate the apple, won't appreciate the orchard', meaning if we don't appreciate little things, we won't appreciate great things.

There is also the perspective of the King, who was loved, generous and considerate. Although he is not the focus of the story, he is the 'wise man in the background', who made it all possible. As a manager, aim to be a source of inspiration by rewarding determination, creativeness and small efforts of all employees, not only of the 'big people'. There is a beautiful underlying storyline of the value of care and creating an enabling environment.

Topics

Determination, creativeness, appreciate small things, enabling environment.

Sweet as Sugar

Bangladesh

A mother in Bangladesh was worried about her son's health. The 10-year old boy was overweight and had brown spots on his teeth. All day long he would eat sweets. Five spoons of sugar in his tea, creamy kalojams, delicious katajams, and lots of sponge rosogolla, sweets for which Bangladesh is famous. Every day the mother told the boy to cut down on his sweets but he just would not listen to her.

One day, the mother decided to ask for help and went to the Mullah with her boy. She said: 'My son eats too much sugar. He is getting fat and I can not afford this! Therefore, I ask your lordship to formally forbid him to eat so much sugar.' The Mulla had listened attentively, thought for a moment and then told the mother to come back in seven days. When the mother returned a week later, the Mulla again postponed the meeting by another week, and yet another week. Finally, after four weeks, the Mulla summoned the boy. 'Now', said the Mulla to the youth, 'I forbid you to eat more than three spoons of sugar and two cakes per day!'
Then the woman asked: 'Why my lord, did you take so much time to give my boy such a simple order?' The Mulla replied, 'Because, madam, I had to see whether I myself could cut down on the use of sugar before I could ask someone else to do it!'



Questions

- Why did the mother seek the Mullah's advice?
- What do you think of the Mulla's action?
- Do you agree that a manager should be able to master things him/herself before asking others to perform in a certain way?

Management link

In this story the wise Mulla was not sure about the task involved, so he wanted to try it out for himself. That is an admirable act of consideration. As managers it is good to strive for empathy; part of your role is to be a coach and a 'people's manager'. This does not necessarily mean that managers have to be able to perform all of their staff's tasks. Imagine the boss of a construction company trying for a week to lay out bricks. Or a manager of a law firm studying each and every law book in the library; that may not make sense. But when it comes to core values it does make sense. If you tell others to be respectful, responsible and honest, you will have to set the example. A manager is, more than anyone in the organization, a role model for others.

Topics

Empathy, coaching, setting examples, manager as role model.

The Big Fat Hen

Asia



In a certain country in Asia there lived an old woman, it is said. She had a big hen that laid her a fine egg everyday. She was the envy of all the other women in the village. While the other women also had hens, they were not so regular and a little lazy. And when their hens laid eggs, they were small and not so nice.

The old lady with the fat hen was really proud of her bird who gave such fresh, big eggs. Yet after some time she became used to having nice eggs and she came up with an idea. 'What if I give my hen a little bit more corn everyday, perhaps then she'll lay two eggs per day. After all, why should I be satisfied with one egg per day only?'

So this woman started feeding her hen twice a day, and gave her a little bit more to eat every day. The hen grew bigger and bigger and eventually became very fat. As she became fat, she also became lazy. She refused to get up and walk around the yard. And then one day, she did not lay even one egg. The villagers were laughing. The old women's hen had stopped laying eggs all together…Now the villagers appreciated their own small eggs.

Questions

- For what reason did the old lady try to improve her hen's egg laying practices?
- Why were the other villagers laughing at the old lady in the end?
- What does this story teach you about improving procedures?

Management link

The Americans have a saying: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'. In other words: any attempt to improve on a system that already works is pointless and may even be detrimental. The story clearly shows how this woman's idea of improving her hen's egg laying practices backfired. Why did she over-feed her hen? Perhaps out of greed, or to impress her fellow-villages, or maybe she was raised in a poor family and food was such a valued commodity in her own life that she could not imagine that even a hen could think otherwise…who knows?

As a manager you will need to promote innovation in your organization, but always make sure to carry out a proper needs assessment before changing any good system or practice.

Topics

Innovation, competition, good practice, timing, needs assessment.

The Loyal Mongoose

India

Once upon a time in India there was a woman who lived together with her husband, their baby son and their pet mongoose. The small brown mongoose was very brave. It could kill any snake, no matter how big. The pet mongoose was loyal and always protected the baby. He made sure that no snake ever got near him. But in spite of this, the mother did not trust the mongoose.

One day, the mother went off to the market to buy milk for the baby, leaving him in the care of his father. While she was gone, there were loud screams from the neighbour's house, and the father ran next door to offer his help. The baby was left alone with the mongoose.

Suddenly a huge cobra slithered into the room, heading straight for the baby's cot. At once, the brave mongoose jumped up and attacked the cobra. It was a hard fight, but the faithful little mongoose managed to kill the cobra, leaving the cobra's blood all over the baby's room.

When the mother came back from the market, she saw the cobra's blood on the floor and on the mongoose's paws and mouth. Filled with grief and anger, she grabbed the mongoose and hit it hard against the wall. It was dead instantly.

Then the baby cried…safe and sound in his crib, with the dead body of the snake underneath it.

Questions

- Why did the mother instantly kill the mongoose?
- How do you think the mother felt when she discovered her baby?
- And the father?
- Have you ever had regrets after making a decision?



Management link

Upon seeing the bloody mongoose near the baby, the mother in this story immediately killed it. She did not think or blink, nor did she even look around the room; she was overpowered with emotions.

Managers have to make a lot of decisions which affect people professionally as well as personally. If you let emotions take control of your judgement, you risk taking the wrong decisions. As a manager you should always reflect and analyse the situation before making decision, especially in the case of problems, to avoid jumping to conclusions.

Topics

Decision making, problem solving, performance appraisal, reflection.

The Camel Heart

Pakistan

In the former province of Sind, there lived a child who always spoke the truth. Even if it would harm him he would never tell a lie. As he grew up to become a wise young man, he was called Gamoo Sachaar (Gamoo the Truthful). On account of his truthful and loyal nature, Gamoo was given a post in court.

The governor's advisor, the vizier, was the only one who seemed to be perturbed by Gamoo's rising fame and power. He was afraid he would be asked to relinquish his post in favour of Gamoo. The vizier told the governor that he could prove that Gamoo was untruthful. The governor, curious, decided to allow his trusted advisor one chance.

Upon his request, Gamoo was asked to take the governor's camels to the garden. Gamoo watched them carefully…when suddenly he noticed a beautiful girl. It was the Vizier's daughter. She had been told to seduce Gamoo and to entice him into killing one of the camels. 'I am the vizier's daughter', the girl said, 'I am suffering from a dangerous illness', and she started sobbing. 'The only way I can be cured, is to have the heart of a camel, I shall be yours forever if you save my life!' Gamoo immediately slaughtered the camel and took out its heart. The girl then asked him to find some dry twigs to roast the heart. When Gamoo returned, she was nowhere to be found. Gamoo realized he had been cleverly tricked. What explanation could he give the governor? He had to consult someone. 'Suppose I tell him that a lion attacked the camel, will he believe me?' After a moment, Gamoo replied himself: 'The governor will want to hunt the lion down, and what if he can not find a trail? No, that is not the way out.'

When the governor found out his favourite camel was dead, he charged Gamoo in court. Gamoo decided to speak the truth, once again. Everyone was surprised. Gamoo had confessed to killing the camel. That would surely mean his death? But the governor said: 'I had faith in your sincerity. Even in the face of possible death you have not tried to blame someone else. I shall reward you, but I demand to know who the beautiful lady was.' The Vizier was visibly shaken, when Gamoo replied that she was his daughter. The governor had already guessed it, and said: 'Vizier, your daughter has given her word of honour, we call upon you to arrange for their marriage in the next three days.'

They both lived happily thereafter.



Questions

- Who did Gamoo consult when he did not know what to tell the Governor?
- Why did he decide to admit that he had killed the camel?
- What can you learn from this story from the Governor's perspective?
- What can you learn from Gamoo's perspective?

Management link

Managers should always encourage their staff to speak the truth, even in difficult situations. An Asian proverb says: If you can't make mistakes, you can't make anything. Human beings are bound to make mistakes; as long as people acknowledge their errors and are willing to learn from them, their honesty should be rewarded.

Gamoo consulted his inner self. When we listen too often to what others tell us, we risk ignoring our inner truths and values. As managers, we should be confident enough to know, deep down, the right path to follow.

Topics

Honesty, integrity, taking responsibilities, inner strengths, making mistakes.

The Inn Owner

Afghanistan

Sarwar Kahn was owner of an inn in the town of Spin Boldak. One day, a merchant came, on his way to a border town to sell camels. The inn owner prepared a good meal of chicken, egg curry and nan for the prosperous-looking merchant, which he thoroughly enjoyed. Next morning, the inn owner made him a breakfast of tea, boiled eggs, fruits and cakes.
'Brother, I can not pay you for boarding and lodging this time for I have not sold my camels yet. I shall pay my dues on my return.' The host agreed.

After three months, the merchant returned to the inn. He was again served with a good meal and a heavy tea in the morning. 'Brother, you have been a good host to me twice, please tell me how much I owe you.' 'It is not much, sir, only one hundred dinars'. 'Whát?', asked the traveller, highly surprised, 'it can not be more than ten dinars on both accounts…' And the inn owner replied: 'the interest has accumulated, let me explain. You had a chicken and four eggs three months ago. During that time, the chicken would have laid many eggs and the eggs would have hatched into chickens and laid more eggs which would have become chicks…'The merchant became angry. 'You are cheating me', he acclaimed. Then he realized that it was the only inn on his merchant route, so he decided to let the qazi (judge) decide.

When the date was set for the trial, the merchant did not show up. Three days passed and both the qazi and the inn owner became annoyed. Why does he summon us and then doesn't show up himself, they wondered.

Finally, the traveller arrived on the scene. The qazi demanded authoritatively: 'you have kept us waiting, why are you late?'
'Your honour, pardon me, I had boiled some corn to make porridge, but then I changed my mind. I decided to sow the corn so that I could reap a rich harvest in autumn. 'You are fooling us, the qazi replied, how can boiled corn be sown?'
'The same way,' replied the merchant calmly, 'roast chickens can not produce eggs and boiled eggs can't give birth'. The qazi and the inn-owner knew they had met their match. The word spread and the inn owner never overcharged his guests anymore.

Questions

- Why did the inn-owner agree to let the traveller pay upon his return?
- Was he right to charge him interest?
- Why do you think the traveller asked for third party mediation in the court?
- Do you think the merchant will come back to the inn?

Management links

This is a story about negotiation. At first, the merchant became angry, but he probably realized that angry emotions are not helpful when negotiating. Also, he wanted to keep the opportunity open to stay at the inn at a later time. So he decided to ask for third party mediation. Sometimes it is wise to take a break before reacting, as first emotions can be strong and can damage your position.

The way the merchant played it out, is called ‘principled negotiation’; not bargaining about positions (you want me to pay, I don’t want to pay) but on principles. The strategy he used was to be soft on the person, show respect by thinking of longer term relationship, yet hard on the subject. Managers need to be aware of different negotiation strategies and use them rightly according to the interest of all people involved.

Topics

Negotiating skills, principled versus positional bargaining, hard and soft negotiation.



The Clever Mouse-Deer

Indonesia

On a hot afternoon a clever mouse-deer was drinking from a clear lake in the jungle, when a tiger passed by. Seeing the little deer, the tiger laughed wickedly: ‘Oh ho, what a pleasant meal you will make for me, I have not eaten in days!’ The mouse-deer, trembling with fear, replied…’for days? You poor tiger, you must be so hungry…surely one tiny mouse-deer like me will not satisfy your appetite. What you need is the flesh of a man!’

‘And what is a man, mouse-deer?’ the tiger asked. ‘Well, let me show you one, tiger’. And as the mouse-deer led the tiger through the jungle, they came across a hunter. ‘Look at this flesh, tiger, so full of meat, surely you won’t be hungry anymore after eating this man?’ And with that, the tiger tried to jump onto the hunter, who quickly shot the animal on the spot.

The deer, very happy with himself for having defeated his enemy so cleverly, went to the lake to drink some more water. Suddenly, something caught his leg…a crocodile, another of his great enemies. With a frightened voice he said: ’you silly crocodile, when are you going to learn the difference between a deer leg and a stick? You are holding an ordinary stick, you see, this is a leg’, he said, waiving his other leg in front of the crocodile’s face. The crocodile opened his mouth to catch the other leg, and quickly the deer leaped away, again feeling smug about himself.

Later that day he met a snail and he could not resist boasting about his smartness. The mouse-dear challenged the snail to a race and to his surprise, the snail accepted. ‘Ha ha’, thought the deer, ‘how can a snail

win a race from me?', and he was off like the wind. But when he arrived at the finish, the snail was already there waiting for him. No matter how often they raced, the mouse deer lost each time!

This is how the little mouse-deer who had been so smart, finally got defeated, not by the fierce tiger or the ferocious crocodile, but by the tiny, slimy snail!



Questions

- Who do you consider the winner in this story?
- Who are the losers and why did they lose?
- Is it possible that a slimy snail (underdog) defeats a mouse-deer in a race?
- Have you ever outsmarted someone?

Management link

Of course there was another snail at the finish who looked exactly the same, snails are everywhere. In this story the snail is the underdog, who has the sympathy of the reader. The tiger, the crocodile and later on the mouse-deer, can be considered as the power-holders. In cultures with a lot of respect for the authority of power-holders, often their power and status does not come from competencies, but is ascribed (through connections, heritage, and money). In more egalitarian cultures, the underdogs have a chance to stand up against the power-holders. The story suggests that 'old-style' power holders (managers) have to watch their steps, because the times are changing and those with brains rather than birth-rights might outsmart them in their jobs.

Topics

Power-holders versus underdogs, competence, winning and losing.

The Golden Cucumber

Sri Lanka

Once upon a time, there was a farmer. He was cultivating many kinds of vegetables: sweet potatoes, manioc, pumpkins, sweet melons, maize, golden cucumber, millet and egg plant. One day, the farmer was going around his field and he noticed this huge golden cucumber, a ran kekire. As the farmer watched this cucumber grow day by day, he felt happy. 'Isn't it a wonderful big fruit? I should not be the only one to enjoy it. It must be gifted to someone, who deserves it?', he thought.

In his village, the chieftain was a kind man. He looked after the poor people. The farmer plucked his cucumber and brought it to the chieftain. 'Please accept my cucumber as a gift, you deserve it for you are always looking after people's welfare'. The chief felt very pleased and wondered how he could repay the farmer.

The chief decided to give his cow away. The farmer could not believe how fortunate he was to get a cow in return for a cucumber. As the news spread quickly around the village, another farmer thought: 'I too must offer a gift to the chief. He gave a cow for a cucumber. If I give my bull, he might give me some land in return, or a paddy field!'

He took his bull and offered it to the chief, who was a wise man. The chief remembered the cucumber gift. Surely this man expects me to give him an even bigger gift now. The farmer was very impatient to receive his gift. The chief went inside his house and brought a large gift wrapped in brown paper. The farmer's joy knew no bounds.
Back home, he opened the package…it was the golden cucumber!

Questions

- Why did the poor farmer decide to give away the cucumber?
- Why do you think the chief offered his cow in return for a cucumber?
- Why did the second farmer give the chief his bull?
- What may happen if we give only because we expect something in return?



Management link

The first farmer in the story shows the values of love and altruism, while the second farmer reveals greed and selfishness. The wise chief was able to distinguish between the two acts and treated the givers accordingly. With the first farmer, he took a risk by offering a huge gift (cow) in return for a small one (cucumber). That was philanthropic, or…was it? The chief is a smart person; therefore, it is more likely that he saw it as an investment in his village's relations. As a manager, you sometimes have to take risks, investing in the people or in your organization without knowing what you can expect in return. Be sure it is a calculated risk, and try to distinguish between true people and those who have means.

Topics

Risk taking, investment, performance appraisal, negotiation.

The Heron Story

Malidives

On the beautiful island of Maakana Fushi in the Maldives, a heron was standing on the beach when suddenly his dropping was washed away by the sea. 'Hey sea', the heron shouted, 'why do you take away my turd… it is mine!' The sea was surprised, but answered: 'Well bird, it is true I took your dropping but I will give you a wave in stead'. Splash! The bird took on the wave and settled down on the beach. Not far from him a group of fishermen were trying to push their boat into the sea. When they spotted the wave, the men used it to push the boat into sea. This upset the heron. 'Where is my wave?', he demanded to know. The fishermen admitted: 'Yes we used it, but instead we shall give you a fish. The heron took the fish and sat down near a group of youngsters enjoying themselves while making music. They had been playing music for hours and were hungry. 'Hey guys, look', said one, 'there is a fish, let's make fish cakes (bokibaa). And of course, the bird complained again, 'that was my fish you took…'

In exchange, the youngsters give the heron an old drum. The bird was now very keen to hide the drum so nobody will take it away. He flew onto the highest branch of a tree and started playing the old drum, 'Dam-dam, dam-dam'. He played so enthusiastically that he fell off the tree and broke his neck… the old drum lying next to him.

Questions

- What do you think of the heron's behaviour?
- What is the difference between the heron's actions and those of the fishermen and the youngsters?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of both types of actions?



Management link

The heron was behaving like a person from an individualistic culture with a deep-rooted sense of personal property in an environment with a collective sense of property (the sea, the fishermen, the youngsters). When the heron asked his share he got it, but this put him on a separate track; a fatal one. He probably could have shared in the commonly owned waves, the fish and the music, even without asking.

For people from more individualistic cultures, the sense of collectiveness is often difficult to understand and appreciate. Striving for individual goals and ambitions is seen as effective and highly valued. This simple story shows that core values of collectiveness are very relevant for teams working in organizations. While the fishermen and youngsters were acting collectively, catching fish, sharing benefits and joy, the heron was more concerned about himself and finally, he was left out. A good manager strives for a balance between the individual and collective goals of the team.

Topics

Teamwork, individual versus collective goals, intercultural relations.

The Lion Makers

India



In India, there are quite a few Brahmans. Brahmans are priests who belong to the upper class; they are usually very smart. They are very proud of their knowledge and often possess magical skills. One day, four Brahmans were walking together in the forest when suddenly they stumbled over the skeleton of a dead lion. One Brahman said: 'this is a good opportunity to prove our magical talents'.

'Yes', said another one, 'let us bring the lion back to life. I will put the skeleton back to together.' And he took the lion's rib cage, his skull and his leg bones and put them back together. The second Brahman said: 'I can give it skin, flesh and blood'. And so he did.
Before the third Brahman could bring it back to life, the fourth Brahman said: 'Wait! This is a lion, remember? If you bring him back to life, he will eat us for breakfast'.

'Oh come on', the others said, 'are you afraid? You don't know what you are talking about.' But the fourth Brahman did not listen. 'You can do what you want, but I am climbing up that tree', he said.
While the third Brahman brought the lion back to life, the lion gave a big roar and immediately jumped onto the three Brahmans. He devoured them completely, while the fourth Brahman was watching the scene from the safety of his tree…

Questions

- Why do you think the lion killed the three Brahmans who had brought him to life?
- Why did the three stay on the ground while the fourth climbed up to the tree?
- What do you think the fourth Brahman felt as he watched the lion devour the others?
- Have you ever let your pride get in the way of your common sense?

Management link

Managers need to have many skills and a lot of knowledge, ranging from how to plan activities to motivate people, from book keeping to persuading clients. People can study for years to become a manager. What this simple story shows, is that you should not try to show off our skills or talents and that you should never forget to listen to your intuitions. Your common sense is often a good advisor.

Topics

Management skills, intuitive leadership, common sense,

The Clever and the Foolish Woman

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh almost every villager knows the folktale of the Tetan Buri, a sharp and cunning old woman and the Boka Buri, a foolish and naïve old woman. They shared one common wrap (kantha), one cow and a small piece of land.

The clever woman suggested that the wrap will be used by her in the night and by the foolish one during the day. The naive woman agreed. That is why, in the cold night the foolish old woman shivered while the clever one slept soundly with the wrap. Regarding the cow, the clever one suggested that the front portion belonged to the foolish old woman and the hind part was hers. This was agreed to. The result was that the foolish old woman had to feed the cow and give her water while the other one took all the milk. When there was paddy grown on the small piece of land, the arrangement was that the clever one would get the portion above the ground while the part below the soil would go to the goody old woman. Again, this was agreed to. The rice went to the clever one, whereas the naive one had the useless roots which she had to pull out and burn to make the land ready again.

The foolish old woman was practically starving and started begging for a little food. One day she approached the barber of another village for some food. The barber, clever like all barbers, asked why she was begging when she had a piece of land and a cow along with another old woman. So the foolish woman explained the situation. The barber smiled and told her to soak the wrap in water when handing it over to the other one in the night and not to give any fodder to the cow but to yell at her in the front part. He further advised her to take out the roots when the paddy was young.

The advice had the result. The old woman shivered and shivered in the night. The cow used to kick her when she would try to milk her. The crops failed and she starved too. She had finally come to notice that there are people who were more cunning. The villagers decided that there should be an arrangement which was more just to the two women.



Questions

- How come the clever woman alone had all the benefits of the properties?
- Do you believe that the barber gave good advice?
- What could have been a fair arrangement to both women?

Management link

This is a story about conflict management. The clever woman had a high concern for her own interest and a very low concern for the interest of others. The result was that the clever one had all (win) while the foolish had nothing (loose). This is a win-loose situation. This works as long as one party is submissive. However, as the story shows, when the other party stopped to be submissive the strategy can backfire and may lead to a loose-loose situation.

As a manager, you should always strive to achieve win-win situations. If this is not possible, then a compromise, where both parties half win – half loose, is a fair alternative. In sharing resources, there is not 'one' best way to distribute, it depends on the interests and needs of the parties involved. A good manager selects a conflict management strategy appropriate to the situation.

Topics

Conflict management, sharing resources, situational strategies.

Chicken Soup

Afghanistan

In the mountains of Tashkurgan lived Abu Khan, a much respected man for his wit and wisdom. One day, an admirer called Abdali, presented him a big, fat chicken. Abu Khan thanked him, they talked for sometime, and then Abu Khan offered Abdali some fresh grapes and tea.
A month later, Abdali came again to visit Abu Khan, but Abu Khan did not recognize him. 'Don't you remember me, I am Abdali, I brought you a nice meaty chicken some weeks ago.' 'Ah, yes, now I remember', Abu Khan said half-heartedly. 'Come in and make yourself comfortable.' Abu Khan offered him some chicken soup.

A few days later, some villagers visited Abu Khan. They introduced themselves as friends of Abdali who had presented him with a chicken. Abu Khan invited them in. He had very little chicken soup left in his kitchen. He added some water to it, heated it and served each of them a bowl of thin soup. The guests thanked him and left.

Yet some days later, another group of villagers arrived at Abu Khan's house. 'Who are you?', Abu Khan asked, 'and what is the purpose of your visit?' 'Dear brother, we are neighbours of the friends of Abdali, who presented you with a chicken.' 'Well, come in then, all of you, please sit down', said Abu Khan. He went to the kitchen, boiled some water, added salt and pepper to it, and served each of the villagers a bowl. The soup has no taste at all, and the villagers remarked: 'Brother, what kind of soup is this?'

Abu Khan replied immediately: 'This brothers, is the water of the gravy of the chicken soup of the chicken which the friend of your neighbour had presented me weeks ago!' The villagers laughed…and left, never to return again…



Questions

- Why did Abu Khan invite the strangers in?
- Was it fair to serve the villagers boiled water?
- Have you ever reacted like Abu Khan?
- What does the story tell you about giving and taking?

Management link

One of the strongest mechanisms for bonding is a gift. Anywhere in the world people buy flowers, food, presents. The underlying principle is 'I give, so you may give.' The pleasure of giving is rarely made explicit, and a gift might also mean it will never be returned. The men in the story were acting a bit foolishly by asking for favours long time after the gift. They therewith compromised the chicken-giver's support.

One of the key roles of a manager is to balance 'give and take'. If you expect high performance, you need to reward and invest in your staff. Rewards can be financial, like bonuses or a promotion, yet non-financial rewards are often very relevant too. Pay your staff a well-timed compliment, give regular feedback, create opportunities for your team to grow and develop themselves (a challenging assignment, a training, a new task, some well deserved time off). This will help your staff to continue good performance so that they don't end up as the watery, tasteless products of what they could be.

Topics

Staff motivation, rewarding, expectations.

The Royal Journey to Heaven

India

Once upon a time there was a fat, foolish king who had a thin, sharp-witted, greedy Minister. The minister took every opportunity to impress the King with his cleverness. Soon the King came to depend on him all the time. 'Promise me you'll never desert me', the King often said, and the minister always replied: 'Never, never, your Majesty'.

One evening the King returned from a stroll along the river bank, when suddenly he heard foxes barking. 'Why are my royal ears obliged to hear their noise?' the King asked. The minister replied: 'Sire, this winter has been severe, the foxes are cold, they are begging for some blankets'. 'Why, how clever of you to understand the language of foxes, but why haven't they received any blankets?' The minister replied: 'the officer in charge of purchase is to blame, Sire', as he had a secret grudge against that officer. 'How disgraceful! Have this man wrap in a blanket and throw him into the sea. Then buy a hundred blankets and give them to my friends the foxes', the King ordered. The minister did as told, except…he did not buy the blankets but put the money in his own pocket.

Later that month, the King came across a boar on one of his strolls. 'My goodness, what creature is that?' the King asked. 'This is one of your elephants', the minister replied, 'but it is so tiny because your mahout failed to feed it properly'. The King was outraged. 'Throw this man in prison and hang him tonight! Then feed the elephant properly!' Needless to say that the minister did the first but not the second. He simply pocketed the money.



That evening, the minister went to the prison to see the mahout, who pleaded for his life: 'I will give you all my savings, my dear minister, if you spare my life'. The minister was pleased. Even more money was coming his way. At midnight, just when the mahout was about to be hanged, the minister said to the King: 'I have consulted my almanac and I found that this hour is a very lucky hour. Anyone who will be hanged now shall go straight to heaven. Hanging the mahout now would not be a punishment at all!'

The King thought for a moment….'Very well, for a long time I have wanted to see heaven. I shall go tonight! My friend, you have always promised to accompany me wherever I went. Why don't you go first?' Unable to disobey the King, the minister was hanged at midnight.

Questions

- Why do you think the King blindly trusted the minister?
- Did the minister get what he deserved? Why?
- Do you believe that the King purposely sent the minister to hang?

Management link

As a manager, you may be surrounded by advisors. Some may have the organization's interests at heart, yet others may have other, more personal interests in mind. It is probably fair to say that most people have both interests at heart. The story shows what may happen if you depend too much on one person's opinion. The King trusted everything the minister said; he trusted his opinion blindly, without checking. When judging performance, it is risky to solely depend on one person's opinion, rather than to look for verifiable consideration. A good leader makes decisions based on both facts and opinions.

What about the minister? He was simply a greedy and lying man who got stuck in his own lies. Whatever you sow you reap…

Topics

Decision making, performance appraisal, balanced judgments.

The Merchant-Prince of the River

Pakistan

Long time ago, a merchant-prince set sail for a business trip on the Indus, the longest and most important river in Pakistan. Before embarking, he told his crew that whoever failed to obey would be left on the banks of the river. One day, the prince and his wife were strolling along a river bank when they saw a goatherd drinking water from the river, just like a goat. The prince told his wife in dismay: 'As the seed, so the fruit, only a low-ranking goatherd can behave like this without any manners'. The wife replied: 'My lord, it is said that a man is known by the company he keeps. This boy has not had any other company than his sheep and goat; therefore he is behaving like them'.

The prince, who did not like to be disputed, demanded his wife to take back her words, but she insisted, saying: 'The truth can not be disputed'. The prince was furious and left his wife on the river bank. But the prince's wife was a wise woman and she calmly thought out a plan to humble the proud prince. She asked the goatherd if she could live with him. He was highly surprised but agreed quickly. The next day, the princess sold her expensive necklace and with the money, she cleaned the goatherd's cottage and hired help to tend the flock. She also hired a Mulla to teach the young man. Slowly, under the supervision of the wise lady, the goatherd blossomed into a handsome, well educated man with a prosperous cattle business. The small river bank village became a thriving port.

After a few years the port was important enough to collect taxes from the merchant ships. One Sunday, a day long awaited for, the merchant-prince's ship arrived. It received special order that it could not proceed for 10 days. The prince decided to pay a visit to the tax-collectors and entered the goatherd's visitor's room. Aware that he had to obtain permission from this man, he bowed his head and humbly asked his permission. Before the goatherd could offer thanks to his guest, his wife cried out laughing: 'Do you recognize this gentleman sitting in front of you? Tell me now, were you or was I right?'



Questions

- What do you think of the way the prince judged the goatherd in the beginning?
- How do you think the prince felt when he realized he bowed before the same goatherd at the end of the story?
- Do you believe people can change like the goatherd?
- What can you learn from the story from the wife's perspective?

Management link

The prince's wife went to great length to prove him he was wrong. While most people would not spend half their lives to prove a point, the story shows how the wife was victorious in her belief that people can develop, despite their humble backgrounds. This illustrates the 'nature versus nurture' debate. Are people destined by their nature, or can anyone, with the right education and guidance, become successful?

As managers we believe the latter, of course. When you recruit people, you search and select for potential. Education, skills and experience are important of course but a manager with vision sees through people's qualifications to recognize potential and nurture their competences

Topics

Recruitment and selection, competency development, nature versus nurture.

The Poor Fat Cook

Sri Lanka

In the heart of Sri Lanka there once lived a rich king. One night, three clever thieves broke into the King's palace to steal precious goods. But the King's guards were also clever. They caught the thieves red handed as they tried to run away. They were brought before the King. 'Did you commit that robbery?' the King demanded. 'We did your Majesty.' 'Are you guilty or not guilty?' enquired the King. 'Not guilty, your Majesty.' The King raised one eyebrow. 'How is that?'

'It was easy to break into the palace, because the mason who built your walls did a poor job. The cement was loose. Therefore, the mason is guilty.'

'Bring me the mason', ordered the King. 'Mason, are you guilty or not of putting the cement very loose when you built these walls?' 'Not guilty, your Highness. The labourer I appointed to mix the lime did not put enough lime in it.' The labourer was summoned. 'Are you guilty?' the King asked. 'Not guilty, Sire. When I was mixing the lime, a beautiful girl passed by, and I got distracted. The girl is guilty, your Majesty.' The girl was brought in. 'Are you guilty of distracting this labourer's mixing with your pretty looks?' 'Not guilty my King. If the goldsmith had given me my jewellery that day, as he had promised, I would not have gone by that day. So the goldsmith is guilty.' The goldsmith was summoned. He had no reply and remained silent.

'So the goldsmith is the guilty one', the King concluded. I shall have him set against a large rock and my biggest elephant will stab him in the belly with his tusks until he dies.'

When the goldsmith heard the verdict, he began to cry. 'But King, can you see my skinny posture? If your festival elephant will gore his tusks into me, he will hit the rock and break his teeth. Why don't you fetch your palace cook, he has a big pot belly so that when he is pierced, your elephant will not break his beautiful tusks'.
The King thought for a minute, and then summoned the chef cook. He was put against a large rock and the festival tusker gored him in his fat middle.

The goldsmith, the pretty girl, the labourer, the mason, and of course, the three thieves, all sighed of relief and went away thanking their lucky stars…

Questions

- Why was the cook put to death?
- Who was responsible for the theft?
- Based on what kind of information did the King make decisions?
- What happens if people put the blame on other people?
- What can you learn from this story as a manager?

Management link

This story is about accountability. It shows what can happen when nobody is taking responsibility, everybody points at somebody else. Obviously, it is taken to the extreme so it becomes funny. As managers, you should encourage your staff to take responsibility for their own acts. Yet at the same time, when you delegate tasks to others, you are not relieved from your responsibilities. As a manager you are ultimately responsible for everything going on under your supervision.

Topics

Taking responsibilities, decision making, accountability.



ISBN 978-955-1874-00-1

Illustrations by Susil Jayashantha Perera, Sri Lanka
Cover and interior design courtesy of
K+VL Reclame, Breda - The Netherlands
www.kvlreclame.nl