

# Raman's Ordeal : Executive Motivation in a Hostile Work Environment

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## Abstract

The case study illustrated the complexity and dynamics of a hostile work environment in a typical large-scale project in the mines and minerals sector in India, the motivations of a key executive, and the required management skills to perform in such settings. Data were collected from the affected executives and other functionaries of the company and other related persons. The names and places were changed to maintain confidentiality. The sequence of facts presented in the case study are expected to help the readers to apply motivational theories and theories concerning management skills with a view to gain richer insights into the associated concepts. The case can also be used to illustrate distinctive aspects of organizational culture, virtues, and institutional inconsistencies.

**Keywords :** industrial relations, project execution, regulatory compliance, human resource, management skills, motivation

**JEL Classification :** J53, K42, L52, L61, M54, M55

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For Raman, the Senior Manager - HR & IR at a large green-field metals and minerals plant owned by a large Indian conglomerate, it was a normal working day on December 18, 2013. He was driving down to office from his residence along with two colleagues in a car. The plant is located in one of the industrialized western districts of the state of Odisha in the Eastern part of India. After about 45 minutes, Raman's car was stopped by a group five people, two of whom were known to Raman and his colleagues. Raman did not hesitate to ask his driver to stop the car as two known people had appeared to approach for some road side help.

Soon after stopping the car, two of the people dragged Raman out of the car and assaulted him in full public glare. It was a highway stretch, which has substantial traffic flow during the morning hours. The accomplice of the two known people joined in assaulting Raman with iron rods and a locally made knife. The well-built Raman was desperately trying to protect himself in whatever way possible. Unfortunately, he could not run as he had a troubled knee with ligament surgery a few months back.

Seeing the assault, Raman's two colleagues and the driver came out of the car pleading before the assailants to stop and leave Raman. The assailants kept shouting in abusive language and kept saying, "how will you not give jobs to our people?" and continued to assault Raman with the iron rods, pushing the two colleagues away. They, however, did not harm the two colleagues. But they did beat up the driver, when he tried to protect Raman.

The assault continued for nearly 20 minutes, after which the assailants fled the site. The local police was immediately informed, and Raman was rushed to the nearest hospital located at a distance of 25 miles. He was diagnosed with head injury and multiple cuts all over his body, including a deep cut on the right side of the forehead, close to the eye. He was given first aid, cleaning and dressing of the wounds were done and Raman was

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put under observation at the local hospital. By that time, the top management had rushed to the hospital and planned to shift him to a super-speciality hospital in the state capital, located 225 miles away.

Raman's wife was informed about the incident through a colleague's wife, and was asked to get ready to travel along with her two kids. Arrangements were made to give moral support to Raman's family with colleagues and their families around. Raman was put in a fully equipped ambulance and was taken to the super-speciality hospital. His wife along with trained paramedical staff accompanied Raman in the ambulance. The two kids of Raman, an 8 year old daughter and a 6 year old son were also moved out of the city to their grandparents' place in the state capital with the wife of a colleague in a separate vehicle. Throughout the road journey of 7-8 hours, the kids were consoled by the lady, and they seemed to be under control emotionally. Similarly, Raman's wife was being consoled by the top management with assurance of all support.

The ambulance reached the hospital at around 10 p.m. and Raman was rushed to the casualty section of the super-speciality hospital. Due to bad luck, there was no bed available in the ICU of that hospital, and he had to wait in the ambulance, with anxiety rising in everybody concerned about Raman. Finally, after about 2 hours of waiting in the ambulance, he was shifted to another equally good hospital in that city. On preliminary examination, Raman was declared safe without any internal injury and out of danger. He was, however, admitted in the hospital and put under observation under a senior surgeon.

Finally, early in the next morning, the family, friends, officials, and colleagues got relief from the stressful incident, seeing/ hearing about Raman's stable health condition. Raman recovered really fast, and was back in his parents' house after 3 days in the hospital. He was advised rest for 15 days. He was visited by all the top executives, including the company's CEO, who travelled all the way from the company headquarters in Mumbai to visit Raman. Raman resumed work (working from home) soon after his discharge from the hospital. During this period, he received anonymous calls on his cell phone with life threats and dire consequences for his family. He recorded the calls very systematically and reported the same to the local police station under intimation to the police authorities concerning the place of assault. Based on an FIR filed after the incident, cases were registered against the 5 assailants. They were arrested on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day and were charge sheeted under various provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). However, all of them secured bail.

Raman resumed his duties at the plant after about a month of the incident. He was provided armed security for to and fro office travel. His family was also provided with security on a need basis. Life appeared to be normal as usual for Raman again. He refused offers for transfer to another location (safer location), and expressed his commitment to work in the same plant location. He continued his work with full vigour. Year after year, Raman has been rewarded for his outstanding performance ("EE – Exceeds Expectations). He was promoted and posted as Head of HR and IR at another plant of the company, 40 miles away from the earlier plant, effective from September 1, 2015. After nearly 4 years of the assault and filing of the FIR, the assailants were found guilty of attempt to murder by the trial court and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment.

## **Raman and His Work - Life at the Plant Site**

This was Raman's third job. At 24, he started his career at a high-speed steel plant in 1994 as an Executive Assistant. He completed his MBA (part - time) with HR as a major from a reputed university. He was elevated to the position of Assistant Manager - HR soon after his MBA in 1998, with responsibilities in the areas of industrial relations and welfare. In 2002, he moved to a thermal power plant as a Senior Executive with similar responsibilities. He moved to the present organization in April 2008 as Deputy Manager - HR & IR. After a brief posting at the regional office in the state capital, he moved to the plant site, a barren land then. He was part of the core team entrusted with the responsibility of acquisition of land and overseeing the engineering, procurement, construction, and commissioning (EPCC) activities. His primary responsibility was to ensure compliance to regulations (with reference to the large number of workmen with the EPCC organizations), manage external

interface (involving local public, politicians), and manage the rehabilitation and resettlement-related tasks related to the displaced families. Subsequently, when the plant was getting ready for commissioning, he was entrusted with the responsibility of core human resource management related tasks. He reported to the Head of the Plant administratively (although there was an HR Head for plant operations) and reported to the Cluster Head – HR functionally. Adequate decision rights were delegated to him for smooth functioning.

Execution of Greenfield projects in the metals and minerals sector in this state in India was an uphill task, with major interruptions from disturbing elements in the society and government. For instance, there would be demand for gratifications by local political leaders (and their hench men) as well as regulatory officials. On some plea or other, there would be some local disturbance or other on an ongoing basis. Raman had established good contacts with such stakeholders to get timely advance information about possible disturbances and was prompt in taking preventive action. As a result, the project execution was majorly smooth without any major disturbances.

Starting from scratch, Raman built structure, system, and processes aligned with the culture of the parent organization, as he began his work at the plant site from a make-shift office. Being part of a conservative business conglomerate, Raman often faced constraints in speeding up decision making. These became necessary owing to a very hostile external work environment at the project site. Matters pertaining to rehabilitation and resettlement were particularly critical with societal expectations far exceeding the entitlements under the law. Raman successfully used his networking and social skills to solve the associated problems, and the plant recorded cent percent compliance within the stipulated period.

Recruitment of locals is a critical issue in all Greenfield projects in the region, and this plant was no exception. Troubles started when large EPCC companies started their work at the site. These companies would face undue demand from locals for employment, and the ultimate responsibility of resolving the associated problem rested with Raman. Over a very short period of time, Raman took several local influencers into confidence, and successfully mediated between the local job seekers and the EPCC firms to solve the employment issues. Once work started at the site, the demand for contracts from the locals started to emerge. Here, Raman played a very critical role in identifying less technical and low-skill based civil/ construction jobs for some locals through subcontracting from the EPCC firms. Through this process, Raman built rapport with the locals in general and locals who influenced the society members in particular. Still, there were more aspirants for the contracts at the plant site. The site witnessed several disturbances, when groups of people supported by hooligans would disrupt work, damage property, and create a sense of fear in the minds of the key persons involved in execution of jobs. Raman would intervene to mediate between the parties to resolve the conflicts.

However, when the recruitment for staff in the company's pay-roll started, the real trouble started. The number of job aspirants far exceeded the available positions. Raman, in association with the corporate recruitment group, created a transparent process for the recruitment and selection. However, the supply far exceeding the demand, made many aspirants unhappy. This triggered formation of power centres in the neighbouring villages, and competitive politics for jobs at the plant. Groups of unemployed youth led/ supported by a few political persons would come to the plant with undue demand for employment. There were instances of altercations, verbal abuses with plant staff, and vandalism at the plant site. While Raman would use his contacts and influence to bring down the tempers, the measures were temporary in nature. There had also been instances when matters of vandalism were reported to the police. With great difficulty, the recruitment for the first stage of operation was complete. The next step was the engagement of contractual staff for certain operations of the plant. This was a relatively less challenging job. Many job aspirants who could not make it to the regular pay-roll were accommodated in contractual positions.

The 1<sup>st</sup> stage of commercial production at the plant commenced in February 2012, and work on the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage involving EPC firms was in progress. Although the extent of disruptions by the locals reduced greatly, two groups of people supported by local politicians started to put forth undue demand related to compensation for land to be acquired. The demands included jobs for multiple family members and contracts for civil constructions over and

above the financial compensation as per law. These stretches of land were critical for the plant operations, which could not be acquired in the initial stages owing to title dispute, and multiple ownership claims. A major conflict emerged during the process of negotiation for acquisition, with the two groups of owners sticking to their positions, and company management finding it unreasonable to accept the demands. Raman was assigned the task of negotiating with the stakeholders. After three months of negotiations, a settlement was reached for the acquisition. The company had to accept certain conditions on civil construction works and job (although not fully) to close the deal. Since the benefits for the land owners were better than the previous land losers, there was certain discontentment among older groups of land owners and local people. The discontentment was reflected in disruption in work in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the plant. Raman continued to use his networking and negotiation skills to resolve the ongoing conflict, resulting in smooth progress of the construction and commissioning work in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage.

## **Managerial Implications**

To be effective at the individual, group, and organization level in the contexts of high level of emerging and evolving hostility in the work environment, there is a need to acquire a set of appropriate management skills on the part of key executives. It is consistent with management skill theory (Chaves, 2017; Carlopio, Andrewartha, Whetten, & Cameron, 2012 ; Peterson & Fleet, 2004 ; Sar, 2017) and organizational commitment (Ramaprasad, Nandan Prabhu, Lakshminarayanan, & Pai, 2017). Concurrently, there is a need to strengthen certain aspects of organizational culture like sharing and caring.

For individual key executives involved in execution of projects involving interaction with multiple stakeholders with conflicting expectations, complexities and dynamism can emerge unexpectedly. To be able to cope with the associated challenges, strong sets of management skills would come handy. Out of a broad array of management skills, those concerning management of stress ; analytical and creative problem solving ; communicating supportively ; and managing conflict can be critical in coping up with the challenges under reference. It is consistent with personal and interpersonal skills theory (Analoui, 1995; Araújo & Pestana, 2017; Chaves, 2017) and managerial competency (Lakshminarayanan, Pai, & Ramaprasad, 2016).

In hostile work contexts, management of interdependency in teams would become critical as complexities and dynamism emerge unexpectedly. This would require management skills concerning empowering and delegating, and leading to positive change. As scenarios evolve during project execution phases, there would be transformation of roles and goals of key executives requiring role and goal clarity of self as well those of other groups/ team members. The management skills concerning empowering and delegating and leading to positive change can be of critical importance to cope with the associated challenges. It is consistent with group and team skills theory (Chaves, 2017; Smith, Smarkusky, & Corrigall, 2008).

For organizations, the critical challenge covers attracting, retaining, and motivating talent to function effectively in hostile work contexts (Akhtar, Zahir, Tareq, & Mahdzir, 2017). The power of an ethical culture, with balanced emphasis on profit and ethics, can be of high significance. While organizations have clear rules for reward for performance, the same may not be sufficient to attract, retain, and motivate talent. An ethical culture would be critical to motivate executives operating in hostile work environments. It is consistent with the theory concerning impact of organizational culture on employee motivation (Flisak & Bjerkhage, 2015 ; Hunt, Wallace, & Richards, 1999 ; King & McNerney, 2016 ; McGregor & Doshi, 2015).

## **Questions for Discussion**

(1) What kept Raman motivated ?

- (2) Which management skills are evident in Raman?
- (3) Put yourself in the position of Raman. Would you have done something differently?
- (4) What is distinctive of the organization?
- (5) What institutional inconsistencies are evident from the context presented?

## Teaching Notes

### (1) Case Synopsis

Development of Greenfield projects in the metals and minerals sector in India face delays and cost over-runs owing to external disruptions in project execution. These disruptions relate to interfaces with the civil society and regulating bodies. The responsibility of managing the associated interfaces during the project execution rested with Raman, Senior Manager, HR & IR posted at the plant site. He would often face demand, which far exceeded that prescribed as per the rules and norms. He had clear decision rights and had to abide by a set of decision rules to manage the external interfaces. At times, owing to organizational constraints and on ethical grounds, he would politely say no to certain local demands. Besides a small number of interruptions, the project execution was by and large smooth. However, when it came to recruitment of staff for operation and maintenance of the plant, the expectations of local people became increasingly difficult to handle, owing to a large gap between the number of job seekers and jobs available. Raman made efforts to make the recruitment and selection process transparent and thereby, fair with the involvement of local authorities and external professionals. However, there were groups of disgruntled people from among the locals who did not get selected for jobs at the plant. On December 18, 2013 at around 9 A.M. on his way to office, Raman was assaulted by a group of people who were shouting about issues on employment. Raman survived the fatal attack and was back to work after a brief break for treatment. He refused a transfer to a so-called safe location within the group of companies, and has been happy in his job with a high level of enthusiasm.

### (2) Instructors' Notes

The case study is aimed at gaining insights into the dynamics of motivation and role of management skills in success for executives working in hostile environments. The discussion questions and approach to discussions on the questions are as follows :

#### Q 1. What Kept Raman motivated?

**Ans 1.** The processes that account for Raman's intensity, direction, and persistence of effort toward timely execution of the project clearly reflect in the case study, giving direction on the fundamental concept of motivation in the workplace. Two motivational theories can be illustrated through this case study :

- (i) McClelland's Theory of Needs, and
- (ii) Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory.

**(i) McClelland's Theory of Needs :** The drive to excel in relation to a set of defined standards, that is, timely completion of the project and avoid cost over-runs clearly reflects in Raman. Raman appreciates the need for power to achieve the objectives. Thus, the need for power has been a source motivation. Raman's need for affiliation to manage high level of interdependencies involving multiple internal as well and external stakeholders can be another source of motivation.



**(ii) Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory :** Students can be asked to reflect three things : (a) Raman's efforts in managing the external interface leading to successful performance, (b) Raman's performance leading to appropriate rewards, and (c) the value of these rewards to Raman. Furthermore, the organizational culture supporting/ not supporting effort - performance - reward - goal link can be discussed.

**Q2. Which management skills are evident in Raman?**

**Ans 2.** Managing personal stress, solving problems analytically and creatively, building relationships by communicating supportively, and managing conflict are some of the management skills that appear to be evident and key to Raman's success. Students can be divided into groups to come up with their own perspectives on these skills and reflect on the evidence in Raman and relevance thereof.

**Q3. Put yourself in the position of Raman. Would you have done something differently?**

**Ans 3.** Readers can take varying positions depending upon their training and personal experience. In a class setting, students can be assigned to discuss this issue in small groups and generate perspective. A synthesis of the perspectives thus generated can be done by the instructor. It is suggested to avoid making any judgement, rather help participants to appreciate multiple perspectives.

**Q4. What is distinctive of the organization?**

**Ans 4.** The facts presented can illustrate distinctive aspects concerning organizational culture and virtues. As regards culture, Hofstede's model capturing power distance, collectivism, masculinity (a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success), uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and restraint (a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms) can be discussed. As regards organizational virtues, a judicious balance between excellence (following ethical practices) and success (project completion in time) can be discussed.

**Q5. What institutional inconsistencies are evident from the context presented ?**

**Ans 5.** The expectations of members of society from industry, in politically sensitive and economically backward regions, bring into the focus the role of institutions, that is, the regulating agencies of the government and the political entities at the state as well as the panchayat level. Inconsistencies arise when compliance to regulatory requirements is either not possible at times and compliance does not satisfy the local communities, including the office bearers of regulatory and political entities. While there are no quick solutions, managers operating such hostile work environments need to appreciate the presence of such inconsistencies, with a view to orient their problem solving approach analytically as well as creatively.

## **Suggestions for Further Reading**

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## Disclaimer

This case was prepared by the author for the sole purpose of aiding classroom discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, or sources of data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management. Certain names and information have been disguised to maintain confidentiality.

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