

When an organisation grows too large

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Lubricate every pipeline of the organisation with empathy and connectedness | Photo Credit: [Getty Images/iStockphoto](#)

How do you preserve the warm and the personal, even as the organisation expands?

A few weeks ago, a colleague of many years, announced a seminar organised by him. In the early years of our institution, he would drop in at my desk, bounce ideas for such events, pick my brains and go ahead with whatever he was cooking. This time, informing me just days before the event, he confessed that he did not want to disturb me, saying, “You must be so busy, I feel guilty, encroaching on your time.” I was saddened.

Had we as an organisation grown so large that a friendly long-time colleague feels that way? We have both grown with the institution from its infancy, and into different roles and responsibilities as is natural, but how, when, and why did such distancing occur? I explained to him that everyone was equally busy, his time as precious as mine; and that this was true in all spheres — a frontline salesperson, the vice-president of marketing operations, the college lecturer or the Dean at the University.

On the heels of this, came another incident. A colleague who joined us as a rookie more than 20 years ago was leaving, to go back to his native place and begin second innings. He was saying his goodbyes when I asked him if he had said farewell to our CEO. He was shocked by my suggestion, almost as though I was out of my mind. And yet, 20 years ago, it was the CEO who had done his final interview and decided to hire him.

We were a small team then and admittedly now a very large organisation. The exiting colleague and the CEO were separated by a few reporting layers, but had we grown so big and distant, that this person felt that if he were to say a courteous farewell to the CEO, he may be intruding? Somewhere, I fear that such self-imposed misapprehensions become embedded in working life culture.

The silo curse

I have spent most of my working life in organisations that I joined when they were just starting and have been with them as they grew into mature outfits. And from experience, I attempt to interpret these signals. In the early years, when an organisation is small, the

atmosphere around the workplace is abuzz and warm; every member feels special. Colleagues seem to thrive in each other's company, and work seems more like a mission or an adventure.

As the organisation finds its feet, meets success, it is a matter of time before a team of twenty in two locations, becomes 200 and then 2,000 across multiple locations.

The challenge is to manage the evolution from a small and intimate outfit to a large, and efficient one, while retaining the *joie-de-vivre* and ethos of the organisation. How do you preserve the warm and the personal, even as the organisation expands in geography, in products, services, functions, and inevitably in hierarchy and increased layers of reporting structure?

Let us understand this complex journey from small to mature, by examining just one aspect of change. As the leader of a fledgling organisation, the CEO personally interviews and recruits every person, whether at a senior level or a fresh campus recruit. But as the organisation matures and grows, he or she can realistically only interview persons joining at a certain level in the organisation.

So much so, that in a widely spread organisation, the CEO can humanly meet only some employees at an individual level. This is true of even the truly humane leaders who care deeply for their members, who travel 250 days a year and rub shoulders with their frontline troops. In fact, at a distant field or branch locations, it would be no surprise that employees hardly meet even their zonal or national heads on a one-on-one basis. For the front-line person, organisation leadership begins and ends with his/ her supervisor.

And herein lies the risk. Cardinal values, the culture, and the ethos of an organisation are everything. And if over time, the interactions at an individual level are restricted to only the supervisor, the organisation becomes completely dependent on that local leader to live the values of the organisation.

As for the employee, the feeling that his or her career is being determined entirely — I deliberately choose this extreme expression — by the supervisor becomes overpowering. For some supervisors, this can bring a heady sense of power and authority.

Sense of belonging

That is why organisations that manage the transformation successfully are led by people who consciously invest time, thought, and energy to create various avenues for employee interactions. When these leaders say that they want their organisations to remain nimble, they also imply that they care for every member.

These leaders create a system that enables accessibility and reach for every member with the senior-most leadership; this in turn creates reassurance for employees and instills the necessary checks and balances for their supervisors. Favoritism, cronyism, and whimsical prejudices are thus actively discouraged, and the atmosphere is conducive for good work.

The annual appraisal can be another key enabling organisational system. There are enough jokes about how this has become a ritual in many places but if the culture is one where the team of senior leadership invests significant time with supervisors to review the appraisal of team members will ensure that these are done with rationale, evidence, and sound qualitative judgment. This becomes a significant strength of a growing organisation and one that signals the culture of the organisation.

Often, accessible and genuinely approachable leaders believe that their members will open up with them because ‘everyone can see’ this attribute of theirs. It will come as a shock to them to know that many of their members hesitate to approach them. This hesitation might be a deep-seated cultural and moral barrier. A proactive organisation instead of waiting for members to reach out, often initiates and arranges periodic one-on-one meetings — no set pattern or agenda, just a conversation — for their employees with the core leaders of the organisation.

These are not meetings for members to ‘snitch’ or ‘crib’ but an expression of genuine care from the organisation. After all, if people are the organisation’s only assets and they walk out every evening (to hopefully, walk-in next morning), it makes eminent sense to acknowledge these assets — not ceremonially through promotions or increments — but by listening through the year to their concerns, their ideas and suggestions and identify members with potential and attitude to take different responsibilities.

In a small organisation, everything is out there in the open. Around a cafeteria table, literally, everyone knows everything. But in a large organisation, with the inevitable divisions, departments, functions, and turf battles — curse the silos, but they are there — we must lubricate every pipeline of the organisation with empathy and connectedness, so that the core spirit of belonging that defined the organisation when it was established is nurtured and preserved.

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