

When leaders stand up for their teams

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Leadership



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As India celebrated the success of the Chandrayaan-3 space mission, many recalled an incident from 1979 when the Satellite Launch Vehicle-3 (SLV-3) failed, and the satellite fell into the sea. Satish Dhawan was the Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, the Project Director. The country was disappointed, even livid, and demanded accountability for the Rs 20 crore spent on the mission. Dhawan addressed a press conference, took the blame on himself, and told the country that he had full faith in his team. A year later, in July 1980, the launch cycle was repeated, and the engineers successfully put the satellite Rohini into the near-earth orbit, making India a member of the exclusive space club. This time, Dhawan asked Kalam to lead the press conference. Dhawan had taken the bullet when the mission failed and given full credit to his team when it succeeded. This anecdote is part of ISRO folklore, a profound tenet embedded into its strong organisational culture. Kalam often recounted this incident and said that the boss had more confidence in me than I had in myself.

In 2002, Arun Shourie was the Minister-in-charge of Commerce and Industry and was leading the Indian delegation to a meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). There were hard negotiations and at one point, some of the ministers representing Europe and the United States unfairly badgered the officer representing Kenya. The Kenyan lady could not offer a rebuttal because by the rules of the conference, only ministers were permitted to speak, and the Kenyan minister was away. When it was Arun Shourie's turn to speak, he took on the Western delegates and strongly defended the Kenyan position. This was beyond his brief, and entirely unexpected, but much needed. He had defended what was right and put the bullies in their place.

In my career, I have seen some stellar cases where the boss has taken the bullet and some appalling instances where they have let their teams down.

The IT Director of Tesco, once mentioned to me that when he was new to the company, he had inadvertently sent a report to the Board that had incorrect data and, therefore, wrong conclusions. Being new, he feared the consequences. His boss, who was at the Board meeting, admitted that there had been a mistake and that the responsibility for it was his and not that of the new IT Director or the team. This one deed won him the loyalty of his team forever.

In the early eighties, my hometown of Nanjangud would often witness clashes between two communities. My family runs a tooth powder and Ayurvedic medicines factory in the town and employs a couple of hundred workers. The clashes reached the factory gate and an irate mob belonging to one community was trying to force their way inside to assault workers from the other community. Had they succeeded, a few workers would have been lynched that day. My uncle, who was the head of the business at that time and a public figure with a good reputation, faced the mob and said to them, 'You must first get past me before you get to my workers.' The mob retreated.

However, it is critical for bosses to discern who to stand up for and when. Decisions to back those who have erred come at a high cost and can sometimes even damage their reputations. They need to watch out for wrong perceptions and misplaced trust. A few pointers:

- The fight needs to be for a just cause.
- Knowing your values helps choose when to defend and when not to. Truth is your friend.
- The person you are backing should deserve your support. You should not get blindsided. A stubborn fight on behalf of a team member, dismissing alternate points of view would be irresponsible and could lead to irreconcilable situations.
- You need to go beyond likes and dislikes and support everyone who deserves it not just the ones close to you.
- No one deserves an infinite rope. You should make sure that team members understand what they did wrong and commit to ensuring it does not happen again.

Pep Guardiola, while coaching Barcelona to 14 titles in his 4-year stint had told his players, 'I will defend you to my last breath even if you perform poorly but I will not take it if you don't make the effort.' Pep was empathetic - his players felt safe to fail; at the same time, he was empowering—the players were motivated to give their all to the game. No wonder many see him as the greatest football manager of all time!