

Leaving Comfort Zone, testing yourself in different situations will help NOT becoming redundant



From childhood to adolescence many things tend to attract us, which we start imagining as our future goal. I was no exception.....

Watching movies has been always an interesting time pass for me and as a child, I visualized myself becoming a ticket checker in a movie theatre. This would have enabled me to watch movies free of charge, throughout the day and especially first show of new movies without hindrance.

Time passed and I started enjoying traveling and wished if I could become a taxi driver, which would help me go places. Growing up further brought out my adventurous attributes and I hoped to become a man with gun in Indian Army.

At that time, I was not aware of what destiny has in it for me. I never realized that I was born in “Paper City” of the country with trees all around is with some purpose. Clearing Roorkee University exam in first attempt without undergoing any coaching was a proud moment for my parents. I was offered Pulp & Paper course, which had its campus in Saharanpur besides a leading research institute, CPPRI and one of the leading paper mills in country, Star Paper Mills.

I was probably one of the very few satisfied students in this course as my strong instinct immediately provided benefits of relaxed college life with scholarship, easy access to job and convenient route to go abroad. So, I decided not to change my branch and continue with Pulp & Paper (by choice). Further, exposure to some of the leading mills in India through summer internship, I realized that there is a great opportunity for specialized people in this industry.

As luck would have it, Paper Industry saw a boom exactly in my graduation year i.e. 1995. The salaries increased and leading mills were aspiring for bright engineers. Sinar Mas, first multinational greenfield project in India near Pune, became the first choice and I had the

opportunity of working directly with great leaders and professionals of paper industry. Though, lot of people judged it to be risky option and took other options, I stayed on and enjoyed the benefit of getting mentored by these people. Key learnings from these mentors, which I follow even today are

1. The only way to solve a problem is to go through it.
2. Before manipulating, learn to do an assignment in right way.
3. Nothing is impossible, if you are committed to do it.
4. Create a TEAM
5. The gap between theory and practice = deficiency in our analysis
6. There is no right or wrong way. It's up to an individual to make it right or wrong.

Responsibilities came too early, which also helped in achieving some milestones quite early in professional life, including unconventional responsibility like "ISO Certification". I was given an opportunity to lead team for ISO certification, having only 3 years of total experience. In a nutshell, this brought out passion in me towards my job and the industry. Timely rewards and guidance from the seniors helped in further fueling it with result-oriented approach. As a team, we achieved multiple new records in all the areas of production through scientific approach and innovation, which is still a benchmark for many producers in the country. I am personally proud of the culture of excellence created in the process and especially for establishing the fact "PAPERMAKING IS A SCIENCE and NOT AN ART".

Its worthwhile to mention that during those early years, I did everything which people generally would feel non value-added those days like ETP, Coating, Finishing, ISO, Costing, Rebuild concepts, PCC/GCC plant, Profitability analysis etc. etc. I remember most of the people were keen on working on paper machine only. However, these acquired attributes help in even today in getting a holistic and techno-commercial view on anything & everything.

It was a result of this passion that I could boast of becoming youngest production head in the country in my mid-twenties. After completing my MBA from Asian Institute of Management, Manila, I realized that Asia is the place for growth for next ten years and it would best time to acquire knowledge about new technologies. Following this instinct again and ignoring negativities around traveling abroad, I spent valuable time in South East Asian countries, China and traveling extensively to almost 80 countries around the world from 2004-13. Being part of multiple largest, biggest, fastest paper/board machines and pulp mills was a rich experience. Dealing with multiple communities around the world without understanding local language was a real fun and I realized that right intentions and knowledge sees no barrier in terms of nationality and language. The relationships created during this phase are quite alive and fresh. Going through multiple peculiar problems in those projects during execution, commissioning and operations helped boosting the confidence and again creating a strong global team.

Although, there are numerous examples of achieving "beyond normal" by leaving the comfort zone, I would like to share the some of the important ones:

1. Turnaround of a coated fine paper project through product mix improvement

The set-up, which was designed for making 50-120 gsm base paper and 48 gsm coat weight was changed to 50-245 gsm base paper and 100 gsm coat weight without any CAPEX. This was a beautiful example of what collaboration between Supplier-Manufacture-Customer can achieve, which helps organization make more money, completing the product basket and most importantly bringing all the people together from raw material loading to finished goods loading, no boundaries between Process-Engineering-Marketing-Finance-HR-Procurement-Environment and everyone working in same direction. Suppliers were not treated as financing companies and customer voice was always heard. The multiple problem solving in terms of improving formation, profile, drainage, drying, coating, calendaring, sheeting, finishing has 100's of examples to share on its own. Everyone had to leave their "Comfort Zone" to achieve the challenging task and I am glad that the culture of innovation and achieving the impossible remains the culture of the mill. I personally try to follow the same philosophy till date, and have multiple examples of benefits from this "SYNERGY" and collaborative way of working.

2. Multi-wire board making

I have been blessed to have experienced 5-layer board machine for making Duplex board, Folding Box Board, Cigarette Board and Art Board. Achieving different attributes or functional properties for different grades on the same machine was a challenge with a production capacity of 3000 TPD. Multi-wire technology, although, having some advantages also poses challenges in managing different furnishes & gsm's without blistering, delamination, formation issues, profiles, fiber accumulation, ply bonding parameters management, speed synchronization between different wires etc. Again, this required leaving "Comfort Zone" for all the functions and we could work out the right way-to-operate for all the grades successfully.

3. Customized Techno-commercially viable Product Development for different continents for packaging grades

It's a common knowledge that different continents package same product with different base board. Some use cost effective solutions, some use Hi-Bulk boards and some use brighter boards. It was important to simplify the concept of board making for different continents and we could achieve it with the right usage of fibers (de-inked pulp, bleached chemical pulp, mechanical pulp) and chemicals. We broke the general myths around the board making for the same as using high % of Ash, refining control and usage of dyes without yellowing. It was also a challenge to work out optimum humidity level for the board so that we can avoid curling when it reaches to the final user. We did lot of research around right parameters to define the problem like using vapor pressure as the guiding factor instead of humidity to cater to different ambient conditions.

Having gone through leading technologies in multiple areas, I decided to venture out in marketing arena. This was with a conviction that if I know my product better than others, if I know my costs better than others, then I should be able to market better as well. The experiment was successful, and I could lead the global teams for marketing packaging products. We could achieve new benchmarks in country wise market share and profitability.

Moving back to India was not an easy decision, however, family priorities were of the prime importance and I am glad that the decision was taken at the right time. Since, the focus always have been on learning different things, I took an opportunity to lead a recycled fiber based set up. It has been a great experience from all the aspects i.e. raw material sourcing, processing, finished goods, marketing, HR, Finance, logistics and general management purpose.

After having simplified lot of complexities in the entire career, I thought of contributing further to the industry as a consultant to provide a detached outlook. This also helped me in sharing knowledge with multiple companies in India and abroad. Even for consulting world Pulp & Paper Industry is a niche segment, which allows a good opportunity for specialists. This also helped me in understanding some of nuances on financial side like debt restructuring etc. and, how a 3rd party can add value to the manufacturing sector.

By this time, I had well covered all the functions of the industry in and outside India. The only part remaining was to look at the industry from Technology Supplier point of view. Hence, as the opportunity came, it was no brainer to take the opportunity of leading a globally recognized company in India i.e. Valmet. Valmet is only technology company in the world, which has the solutions for entire industry including pulp mills, recovery, power plants, paper/board/tissue machines, recycled fiber, automation and environmental emissions control. Most importantly, being an OEM provides an opportunity to lead technological trends including integration with IoT.

With COVID the world is changing again, and this has expedited the need for digitalization through remote working and data visualization. Multiple transaction related jobs would need to be automated and decision making would become more informed than instinctive. Over the years, pulp & paper industry has been embracing new technological trends and should be ready for digitalization as well.

The curious child in me remains and my wish is to help industry through finding solutions on waste handling, emissions control, digitalization and providing cost effective solutions for efficiency improvement. Learning continues and the journey continues.....



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