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“Gross National Happiness begins at home ... But, how?”

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“GNH needs to come home”, roared the Kuensel editorial of December 1, commenting on the conclusion of the Third International Gross National Happiness (GNH) Conference held in Bangkok. YES! ... But, the question is HOW?

By “home”, Kuensel meant Bhutan. No. That “home”, first and foremost, is where you work – your commission, your ministry, your agency.

There is a lot of talk nowadays on the philosophy and theories of GNH. That is good. But, there is not enough on the practical of GNH. My talk today is on down-to-earth hands-on stuff of how I went about bringing GNH home to an organization I led at the World Bank.

First, the context ...

I took over the leadership of my organization in early 1997. It was at the height of a civil society movement against the World Bank, called “50 Years Is Enough”.

This global movement accused the World Bank of, among other things, being a bloated bureaucracy – slow, dictatorial, doing its own thing, and interested more in meeting lending targets than real development outcomes or client needs at the grass-roots. The fact is, these criticisms were right.

The World Bank was under a siege mentality, and so was the organization I was asked to lead. I had over 1,000 staff. A bunch of highly skilled and very smart people. All extremely hard working, but driven more by personal ambition than by any collective sense of public service. Turf battles were the norm. Collaboration meant a personal favor. Real problems or hard issues – such as bad governance and corruption – were at best treated superficially.

It was not a happy place. And, I wanted to change all that. But, I didn’t know where to begin, or how to go about the change.

That was when I met His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. For nearly seven years that followed, I set about implementing what I, in my own imperfect way, learned from His Majesty.

What did I learn?

Connect your heart to your head ...

We, the educated, tend to lead and manage people with our “head” – from the neck up, not from our guts. Rational thoughts and actions are of course important, but they alone do not move the people. They do not touch their heart. They do not inspire.

The Fourth Druk Gyalpo did not have that problem.

His Majesty said this, in several kashos: *“In Bhutan, whether it is the external fence or the internal wealth, it is our people.”* GNH is paramount, because the people’s happiness is the foundation of Bhutan’s national security. GNH is Bhutan’s national security strategy itself.

When I learned this from His Majesty, during the first audience granted, I was moved. Moved, not because of its logical simplicity, but because it came from His Majesty’s heart – a passionate conviction.

I do not recall His Majesty’s exact words, and would certainly not repeat them if I did. But, I recall my own reaction. I could relate to it emotionally. I remember thinking, “Wow! My happiness ... the security of my motherland!”

I remember thinking of my ama, of a remote hamlet of Pakistan, where I had lived to experience poverty. “Of course! Ama’s happiness is linked to the national security of Pakistan. It was a miracle that she still hoped for a better life, instead of taking up arms against the government that did not care about the poor. Yes! Pursuit of happiness by the billions poor like her is linked to the security of the world...”

For the first time, I truly understood the World Bank’s vision: the world without poverty. I could feel it, touch it, and smell it.

I was thunder-struck. My heart connected to my head. Instantly, I was convinced I had a dream job to do. My commitment to the world without poverty became my passion.

So, I went home and issued the one and the only executive order ever in my management career. I ordered my staff to spend a week or two, living with poor village families of South Asia – not as honored guests, but living the life of poverty as their adopted daughters and sons. I said, leave your professional mindset behind. Go only with an open heart and the clothe on your back. Anyone refusing to give it a chance does not belong to my organization.

Some called it a gamble. Others laughed at my strange ways. But, I knew one cannot help but be moved by the strength and courage of the poor people, who’s every waking moment is for sheer bodily survival. One cannot help but be moved, when one’s own survival depends on their love, goodwill and compassion. One cannot help but be moved, when the hard reality of poverty

belongs not to impersonal statistics or detached analyses, but to your own ama, apa, sisters and brothers.

You cannot help but be deeply moved, especially when they are your clients whom you are to serve, whose toil and trouble is what pays your salary, back home. You are shocked by your inability and incompetence to help alter their life now. Your earlier pride and conceit, and the stupidity of it all, hit you hard. “What on earth have I been doing at the World Bank all these years ... ?” “What was my education for ... ?” You are shaken to the human core.

If it was a gamble, it paid off. Everyone who went came home humbled, but with fire in their belly to serve the poor. For them, too, the vision of the World Bank became their passion. And, that passion began to change the culture of my organization, simply because basic human values began to drive their professional behavior. They stopped being “bureaucrats.”

How? Three examples.

First, on humility. One group experienced the stinging smoke of village kitchens, and noticed respiratory illness prevalent among their amas, sisters and infants on their back. They smelled the link, came home, and devoted their “mind, speech & body” to research it. Results? Indoor pollution turned out to be the number one cause of death among women and infants of the developing world. “Indoor Pollution Kills” screamed their published study. This experience taught humility, ashamed of not having seen beyond the obvious – HIV/AIDS, TB, cancer, water-borne diseases...

Second, on teamwork. A group of economists experienced what lack of roads does. It is one thing to know the logic of rural roads’ impact. It is entirely another to see your little siblings too tired to study after 3 hours’ walk home, to cry over your pregnant sister who died on the way to the hospital, or to hear your apa utter in despair, “*yoed ba chin song sa med; med ba chin ngyo sa med* (if we have, we have no place to sell; if we don’t, we have no place to buy),” when cash-poor could mean death. The received wisdom of that time was rural roads in sparsely populated regions do not pay. These economists were shocked by their own stupidity. Damned if we can’t solve this, they said, and reached out for professional expertise beyond their own. A multi-disciplinary team worked out a methodology to capture social returns to rural road investments, to value life and eased hardship of their kin families. They were driven by a shared passion to solve a problem holistically, transcending professional and organizational boundaries. And, they discovered the joy of true teamwork that became infectious in the organization. The World Bank funding of your country’s rural roads is one result of this work.

Third, on integrity. It is one thing to know the pervasive and systemic corruption in much of South Asia. It is entirely another to experience this abuse of power in concrete forms and shapes when you are nobody, a poor villager yourself. Your village is without electricity – the very clean energy that can stop your ama’s awful cough – when high-voltage transmission lines are in your plain view. There is no money to bribe the power company for the final connection. The only hope of your apa, to educate his children, is dashed, not because there isn’t a school, but because of ghost teachers. They are on the payroll, but never show up to teach. Your brother’s simple cut is infected badly, not because there isn’t a health clinic, but because its medicine

cabinet is empty. There is no cash to buy the antibiotics, stolen by Health Ministry officials. Good governance became the centre of country assistance strategies, not on paper but in action – no lending, unless governance conditions begin to change credibly. When they said “we will not tolerate corruption, starting right here at home,” they meant it.

Managers and staff who tasted the power of value-driven change wanted naturally to work with the like-minded. Such values as humility, teamwork, and integrity became the hard and explicit yardstick, by which they made hiring, firing, and promotion decisions.

I did the same with my own management team, especially on teamwork across divisions. I even dismissed a few managers because of persistent non-team behavior. Every management meeting was the training ground for teamwork. And, I saw the change beginning, when they started volunteering budget cuts for their own units, to honor the management team’s commitment to business priorities and strategies. “Education is the top priority for Bangladesh, we agreed. So, cut my budget!” said an infrastructure sector director.

Vision and values do have the power to change organizations – not ones just on paper, but those that come from your human core. Slowly at first, and steadily gaining momentum, a new culture began to emerge.

Having engaged in my work with passion, my own journey began. My leadership work became that of keeping that “fire in the belly” burning. And, I kept learning from my role model, the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, for it was a journey in pursuit of happiness.

Happiness makes and excellent business ...

His Majesty focused on GNH because it’s good for the country. I did, because it’s good for business.

The scientific community has known for some time that happy people are the excellent ones, in productivity or innovation. An organization is nothing more than a group of people working together. Be they business companies or public agencies, organizations pursue excellence. It follows, therefore, that their leadership’s work is to make and keep the people happy.

Indeed, there is nothing that motivates employees more than their boss’s personal attention to their happiness. Remember how our own bosses made us “feel”? They did things that made us either “happy” or “unhappy”, did they not? These feelings made a big difference in our drive for excellence, didn’t they?

It is puzzling, then, that few leaders think of their work in that way, and even fewer actually practice the art of making their people happy. Even in the military, of all places, officers have long been trained to go beyond the “hard” stuff to “soft” emotions of the art of leadership – you can’t win the war without winning the soldiers’ heart.

Today, top business schools are paying serious attention to the primacy of “emotional intelligence” among outstanding corporate leaders. Renowned educationists are also focusing on “emotional intelligence” as the key to nurturing leadership talent.

But, how exactly do we put happiness at the centre of leadership work? What worked for me, in practice?

The first thing first. You can't make others happy, if you are not!

Are you?

If you are passionate about your work, with your head and your heart connected, you already have a dream job. You have a good chance of being happy. Congratulations!

But, if you can't be passionate about your present work, you had better find something else to do with your life. Without working from one's head-and-heart conviction, you cannot be the rock that builds the leadership credibility.

Happiness does change how we think about what we do, in managing people...

Focus everything you do as a leader on happiness of the people you manage. But, focus not just on their happiness at work, but also at home. I learned this, not from the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, but from a 7-year old American boy.

His mother was one of my star economists. Her performance began to slack, and we had a heart-to-heart talk. She was disturbed about her son, not doing well at school. His teacher blamed it on her frequent overseas business trips. Indeed, her son wetted his bed every night, whenever she was away. On pure instinct, I suggested she takes him on her business trip.

One day, a note arrived, reporting on what her son did on his trip with his mother. He concluded: “I understand now what my mother does when she goes away. She is helping boys and girls of India who cannot go to school like me. I am proud of my mother. When I grow up, I want to be like her.” His bed-wetting stopped. He began to excel at school, just as his mother did at work.

It was a precious lesson. We are the same human being, whether at work or at home. Happiness in one affects the other, profoundly. Think not of your employees, but their family as the unit of your management attention.

So-called work-family balance is not just about women. It is about all of us. Your attention to the work-family balance is not about being a compassionate manager. It is about your, and your people's, holistic happiness, because it's good for business.

This is a fundamentally different approach to Human Resource policy, from what has been the norm. It introduces changes in all aspects of HR policy and how you put it into practice.

- Annual leaves may be plenty, but have you ever encouraged or insisted your people to take them?
- What about maternity and paternity leaves? Why should they differ in length? Shouldn't they be exactly the same between mothers and fathers, except for the physical and medical differences having to do with childbirth?
- What about excessive overtime, guidelines for business trips, policy on working from home, telecommuting, job-sharing by two or more staff who can only work part time, etc., etc.?

You get the point. The leadership's focus on the holistic happiness fundamentally alters how we think about what we do, in managing our people.

To be sure, I am not suggesting a revolution. I am simply describing the frontier of HR policy and people management, practiced by global corporations of outstanding reputation.

But, if it is a revolution for Bhutan, and you do want to be a revolutionary, please do not begin by designing policies or complex programmes. Ideas for changing policies, rules and regulations will come from your people, if you start acting differently. And, when reform ideas arise, you will have the whole-hearted support of employees. Implementation will never be a problem.

So, my final advice...

Start acting with small things, keep it simple, and make it a habit ...

His Majesty's attention to small details was famous. Simple and consistent, for 34 years!

It's your people's feelings you want to touch. Make a list of small things your bosses did that made you happy, or things you wish they didn't do because they made you unhappy. Start acting on your list.

Make sure you keep it simple, so you can keep it up. Make sure that the list is from your personal experience, from your heart, so you can keep it up until it becomes your habit. It's the heart-felt consistency that makes you a credible leader. You will be surprised how much difference it makes to the morale of your organization.

Here's my list – of eight auspicious small things – with which I began my leadership journey:

- Start every day making a quick informal round of any parts of the organization, just to say, “good morning, how are you today?” (I found happenstance encounters are the best for innovation, problem-solving, honest feedback, and nurturing human relationships. I was amazed how much information I gathered about the pulse of the workplace, or burning issues.)
- Leave the office at the normal closing time routinely, unless emergencies strike. I am grateful to my husband for making me do this! He said, “You're not productive, if you can't finish a day's work by close of business. If you have work to do, do it at home.”

(This gave my staff the permission to do the same, and helped reduce their stress level as well as of their families.)

- But, be the last to leave my ship, the night before a long holiday such as the New Year. Make the round of the workplace, tell staff to go home, and make sure nobody is left in the office before I leave. (This practice actually brought to my attention acute personal or family problems. Often, soul-searching conversations and tearful counseling sessions happened with those who would rather stay at office, all alone, on New Year's Eve...)
- See the employees in THEIR office, not in mine. (It helped bring down barriers in my relationships. Open and honest conversations came much easier this way.)
- Never call a meeting after normal working hours, unless an obvious emergency strikes. And, if I must, make sure to apologize for taking time away from their family. (I know what you are thinking ... "But, what about my boss", right? The first time my boss called a late meeting, said no. I explained my rule, the reason for it, and advised him "The agenda can wait till tomorrow, and the world will not fall apart." He saw the light, and "Mieko won't come" became his excuse for not calling late meetings. If your bosses can't see the light, it's not worth working for them.)
- Chair happy meetings, because they are the productive ones. Keep the mood open, inclusive, and fun. Welcome oppositions and dissenting views. Never end a meeting without asking, "Is everyone happy?" Invite silent people to air their views – they are the ones with uncommon ideas you can't afford to miss.
- Give comments and feedback on what the staff submits within 24 hours. If it takes longer, obtain their explicit permission. (This practice sent a huge signal that I value their time as well as their work. I was quite surprised by its impact on the morale. Of course, your comments have to be substantive and strategic – not micro-managing or purely editorial!)
- Last but not the least – perhaps the most critical of all – is to invest ample quality time in performance reviews of my staff. They are not about filling forms and signing them:
 - My objective for performance review was to help the staff capture their dream job – a critical ingredient for happiness of any working person. I would begin performance reviews with a question. "What is your dream job?" "How close to your dream have you come?" The world was the realm of possibility for the dream, not just what's possible within the World Bank. Want to be a poet? Great! A concert pianist? Wonderful!
 - I would then help them sketch out how to get there from here, beginning with the dream and working back to the present. Agreements were made on concrete work plans and training programmes to take them closer to their dream.
 - Past performance, and remedial plans when there are problems, were discussed in that light, to help them come closer to their dream. (Direct, open and honest conversation became easy this way. No beating around the bushes needed!)

- Make only those promise I can keep, and keep those promise I make. I monitored whether they were pursuing agreed plans and training programmes, and made sure never to permit work or lack of money as an excuse for inaction.

I have made many mistakes on the way. But, I learned to laugh at my own stupidity, and to learn from mistakes with the help of my staff. It made my leadership work the most enjoyable one ever – a dream job, indeed.

In closing...

An organization of excellence is a workplace where everyone is happy, driven by a shared passion, a common purpose. And, I mean everyone, including and especially support staff and others at the base of the organization. It is a workplace where everyone is convinced that each has the dream job to do, where you have fun, learn a lot, and grow personally and professionally. It is a thoughtful organization, where people care about each other, and care deeply about the clients they are to serve.

GNH-driven nation must be built on such organizations, be they schools, business firms or government agencies. But, critical among them all is precisely where you work: the Civil Service.

Your work, by definition, touches the life of every citizen, starting with where it comes into a direct daily contact with the people – your lower-grade officers giving out forms, your receptionists guiding visitors or license applicants through the maze, secretaries answering telephone enquiries...

You are the change leaders for your organization to serve the people. You are the ideal change agents for the society as a whole – the role models for the GNH nation called Bhutan.

GNH does begin at home. It begins with you – each and every one of you in this room. To make it happen is the joy of leadership – *your* own personal leadership. Try it, you'd like it!

Good luck and god speed!