

Freddy was the CEO of one company in a big group of companies. When he had started, his company was very small and was just a start up, but Freddy was very good with numbers and had a strong sense of business. With his highly developed communication and PR skills, he created pretty strong bonds with the clients, and with his exceptional business sense, he grew the business to newer heights every day. Soon, his company became the most profitable company in the entire group. He gained respect of not only his peers and subordinates, but also the Board of Directors of the group. Everyone started trusting and respecting his decisions and before long, he became the God in the small world of that group. Slowly, his reputation spread all over and he became quite an influential personality in the entire industry. However, too much of anything is always bad for us...

With such good performance, the client decided to award more business to Freddy's company. In order to handle this new business vertical, Freddy opened a new Business Unit (BU). Some people were moved laterally from other verticals, while most were new recruits. Bala was made the Head of this new BU. However, it wasn't out of the goodness of Freddy's heart that Bala landed this opportunity; it was because Freddy didn't like Bala much. Bala was a very simple human being and Freddy hated simple. Bala couldn't or didn't manipulate people to achieve what he wanted, and Freddy thought it was sheer foolishness, an opportunity lost. Bala was headstrong and capable, but also listened to others' arguments against any of his decisions; if he found their argument logical, he would change his decision in favour of that argument/suggestion. Freddy thought this was a mark of weakness. He thought Bala feared that his decisions may turn out to be wrong and bring failure. Freddy, on the other hand, would take decisions and then make them right, no matter what. Every decision that Freddy took, whether right or wrong, Freddy would find a way to make that decision profitable. So, the decision would eventually turn out to be right because money spoke louder than words every time.

On a personal level, Bala didn't approve of these ideologies, but he was comfortable giving people their freedom to behave whichever way they thought right. So, he was comfortable working with Freddy with all his quirks, but this couldn't be said about Freddy. Freddy hated how comfortable people felt around Bala, making them like him a lot, while Freddy didn't like his working style one bit. However, Bala always brought results and this troubled Freddy because Freddy couldn't find one reason to fire Bala. So, he would make Bala's life miserable by raising targets irrationally and when he achieved it, Freddy would say he wanted something altogether different. Giving the responsibility of this new BU to Bala was one such instrument for Freddy to make Bala crawl up the walls so that eventually, he would leave the organization on his own accord.

Ritu was another such employee who was transferred from a different vertical to this BU as Bala's subordinate. She was almost like Bala, but more fearless. If there was difference of opinion between Freddy and Bala, Bala would choose to remain quiet, but not Ritu. She was the ugly duckling, not even out of her egg-shell yet, and still had the guts to speak her

mind before Freddy. It was as if a bacteria sat at Freddy's desk, getting snarly. Freddy could sack her any time he wanted, but it was below him to even acknowledge her. She was better sent away into a new, struggling BU where she won't get a chance to even see Freddy anymore. However, Bala and Ritu weren't aware of these reasons of their lateral shift; they considered the shift as a career opportunity.

Ritu was a girl of few words, but was hardworking and confident about her capabilities. She was a strict task-master who encouraged 'work hard, party harder' culture in her team and her team also could never forget certain things that she did for them. Like, when Martin was not feeling well, Ritu had gone out in the rain to get him medicine. Binu was struggling with his performance – he wasn't as good at technical skills like others. This was a capability issue, so Ritu started explaining concepts to him. She had a strong product and technical knowledge. But when she saw that spoon-feeding was making Binu lazy, she changed her tactic and started giving him small challenges. She made it a regular fun, team event. Every day, she would come up with interesting quizzes and challenge the team to find answers to those technical questions. She knew that Binu was competitive as well as resourceful, so most of the times he would come up with an answer first. This way, his interest in technical things grew so much that he soon became one of the best performers in the BU. When she realized that a few of her team members had started exceeding their breaks, she started making tea/coffee for each team member as per their liking, and would bring it to their desks. Her team felt that it was because she really cared for them, but her reason was that she wanted her team to completely focus on the work, rather than spend time gossiping over tea/coffee and exceed their breaks. Another team member, Prasad, was a movie buff who watched movies all day long and dozed off in his night shift. This wasn't a capability issue; this was a willingness issue and needed a different treatment. Ritu talked to him and they agreed to go on a movie binge every week for as long as he kept his performance top class. So, on weekends, more than half her team would go and watch the Morning, Matinee and Evening Shows one after the other, taking lunch-dinner-snacks-and-tea in the theatre itself, and the next night would stand up all through the shift and work. This was, so they won't fall asleep. Gradually, with the weekly retreats and the interesting quizzes, the team's knowledge grew stronger, their bond strengthened, their stress levels dropped, and their performance shot up through the roof. Everybody was granted their wishes, as long as their performance remained top-notch. With such good performance month-on-month, Ritu hoped to get promoted soon.

One day, a manager named Avinash was shifted from another vertical to this BU that Bala headed. Avinash was a bitter bitter-gourd dipped in sugar syrup that was sent to this BU to keep an eye on Bala and to eventually replace him. He also knew that Freddy didn't much like Ritu as well. He was one position below Bala and one position above Ritu. Everyone knew he was Freddy's *paplu*. They didn't like him, but they couldn't even go against him. They just had to bide time and save their skins for as long as they could.

Soon enough, Avinash started sending ripples through the harmonious environment in the BU and made life difficult for each and every person in it. Ritu wanted to learn Reporting as part of her efforts to grow in the organization, but Avinash stopped Bala from teaching her anything, saying that he believed in Ritu's capability to learn anything she wanted, on her own. When people from other verticals visited Avinash, he would make Ritu bring them tea/coffee like a maid, and say that he asked her only because she liked to fetch tea/coffee for others. Questions were raised about her handling of the team and a 360 degree feedback was sought to judge her as a leader. Her team was called in a conference room for a meeting while Ritu was made to wait outside. Then, her team was coaxed to speak out against her.

"As an organization, we care about our employees a lot. So, we want to know how Ritu treats you professionally."

"Is she a strict boss? Or is she slack?"

"Do you think she forgives your mistakes easily, or is she just waiting for a chance to pick on you? By the way, I know she is short-tempered."

"Do you think the targets she gives you are easy to achieve or are they hard?"

"What do you think Ritu can improve upon – as a person and as a leader?"

"Can you give one instance where Ritu came across as rude or biased or unjust against you?"

A lot of such questions were tossed for open discussion, and the team realized that these were not questions; these were traps. No matter how they answered these questions, Ritu was sure to land in trouble. But thanks to the strong team bonding she'd bred in her team, her team stood by her like a strong pillar. In fact, one of her team members, Prasad, even went so far as to say that Ritu was like a gardener – "She knows when and what to pluck and when and what to water," he said.

Avinash realized that no matter what he tried, this team was very loyal to Ritu and would go to the world's end to save her. Moreover, her team was the top performer in the BU. So...he dismantled it. "You are an ideal, model team that any organization could dream of," he said. "And, we want all other teams to learn from you. So, we've decided to put each one of you in separate teams so you could teach them some good habits. Other teams need to learn from you all and each one of you would have the responsibility to teach them how to be like you."

Then, he hand-picked the bottom performers from every other team, created a Focus Team out of them, and put Ritu in charge of them all. "Make this team ideal as well. Show me that your current team wasn't a fluke."

Bala, on the other hand, was in a pot of boiling water. For those who don't know, handling a start-up is like taking care of a baby for the first time, and that too, as a single parent. And Bala had just had a baby as well. His wife needed him at home, while Freddy demanded his presence at office. He was slogging his a\*\* off in the office and at home as well. There was no rest and no break, but scolding and (emotional or other) outbreaks at both ends. At both ends, Bala was listening to threats day in and day out and he couldn't take it anymore. Ritu would see him go into Freddy's office and come out crying. Ritu knew that Freddy's communication skills were such that he could make any person cry in one second and laugh the other second, but seeing Bala in tears would break something inside her. Bala was the father figure for the whole BU, a strong mast that led them all safe out of any storm. Though Bala would never reveal what happened in Freddy's cabin, the grapevine told her about Freddy's real bad treatment of Bala.

With a start-up, the budget is very limited, to the point that it is practically starved of money. Yet, all functions have to be run. This means that the workload is tremendous, but resources and workforce is extremely limited. A start-up, thus, practically runs in the Fire-Fighting mode on a daily basis. Moreover, with such a small team and customers, the business numbers fluctuate wildly – in one month if the stats show that your business is doing well, the next month, the figures could plummet with just a minor stimulus...Till the time you are small, you can't take care of your expenses because you produce very little in terms of work/service/product. Yet, you have to treat your client well if you hope to get business out of him/her. In order to earn more and reach a break-even point, you not only have to develop confidence in the client's mind about your performance, but also have to pour money to show your operational readiness. But when you are small, you can't attract good talent that can give you consistent good performance because good talent requires a good pay scale, which you can't afford as yet. So how will you convince the client that you can deliver sustained, good performance? In short, handling a start-up is like walking a tight rope...anything could go wrong at any moment. Now imagine if you were held responsible for every gentle breeze that rocked the rope that you were walking on... That was exactly what Freddy was doing to Bala. He was holding Bala responsible for every small thing that was going wrong, while it's a given that something or the other always goes wrong with a start-up. You just have to fire-fight it fast and survive. That's all.

Bala struggled a few months, rocking two boats at a time, then decided to quit the job. By then, it had been around six months that Avinash had spent in the BU. He met Freddy soon after he learnt that Bala put down his papers.

"So. Bala is leaving at last?" Avinash smiled.

"This was the day you were training for," Freddy patted his shoulder.

Avinash's smile faded. "I want a promotion and a raise," he said in a firm voice.

“I want Miss World and an oil well in my name,” Freddy shot back. “Now get out of my hair.” He waved Avinash away.

“If I don’t get what I want, I’m putting down my papers as well... Today.”

Freddy stared without a word.

“You can’t find a replacement of Bala soon,” Avinash continued. “Especially not one who is culturally and operationally aligned. I am here and I have trained to run this BU. Ready resource at your service. But, if I don’t get the promotion, I also go today and you’ll be left with no one to train the new person. So, you decide now, because I already have.”

The next day, Avinash was promoted, but without a pay raise. Avinash accepted the deal because he knew that one year in this new designation, and he would get a much bigger hike in the next job that he takes – salary brackets inevitably increased with higher designations.

However, Ritu’s problems were going to multiply, now that Avinash was heading the BU and Bala gone. Even though Bala didn’t give her a special treatment, at least he was just. She got genuine praise when she did a good job and got a scolding when she goofed up. However, with Avinash, her good jobs would be looked at with scepticism, efforts would be made to destroy what she built well, and her goof-ups could even cost her the job. She was very upset the day Bala bid adieu.

Ritu was left alone with handling the most notorious team and that too, under a microscope. The Focus Team was also the biggest team in the BU, and was formed of all the ability issue and willingness issue cases – either knowledge-wise or skill-wise challenged, or highly naughty pranksters with no regard for regulations.

For the ability issue guys, she initiated a Knowledge-Base project. It was company policy to acknowledge any initiative that increased the productivity, quality, or profits of the company by giving a certificate to the employee who took the initiative. She took advantage of this policy and encouraged everyone in the BU to submit technical articles in the form of Problem → Solution and earn a certificate each. She was a very good motivator and soon, the articles started trickling in. She then started organizing such submissions into various categories, so that whoever was going to access it, would find it in the form of a tree. The user was presented with multiple choices at each level. For example: Is it a software problem or hardware? If the user clicked on Software, it would present further choices: (i) Is there an error message? (ii) Blue Screen? (iii) Slow computer? (iv) Other Anomalies (referring to viruses, Trojans, worms, etc.) and so on.

For the willingness issue cases, she first took a meeting of them all.

“You must have seen how people in this BU and others look at me,” she started. “What do you think they think about me?”

“They respect you.” “Some of them like you.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“You have good knowledge.” “You do more than anyone else can do.” “You stick your ground without fear.” “But you also respect everyone as equal.”

“And what do you think people think of you?”

The audience became quiet.

“And why do you think that is?”

Again, there was no answer.

“I’ll tell you why. It’s because they’re afraid of you.”

Surprised, questioning eyes shot up to bore into her eyes.

“Everybody cannot be naughty” she explained “because naughtiness requires one to be smart. If you can pull a prank on others, it means you are smarter than them. Not just that, but you also know their limit of smartness and you surpass it. Do you know what power that is? This puts you way above their level. They keep telling you that you’re a good-for-nothing because if you start believing them eventually, they would have secured their position at the top. However, if you make even 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of their efforts, you’ll get to even higher positions than them.”

The audience started exchanging glances, unsure about what was being said.

“Don’t believe me?” Ritu challenged. “Let’s do a small experiment, say a 2-week project. Promise me that you’ll make a genuine effort to learn whatever you don’t know, and sincerely try to improve your performance. If your performance doesn’t shoot up in the coming 2 weeks, we’ll drop the project and get back to our normal lives. Alright?”

Her team members nodded and thus, the experiment begun.

Next, she took one-to-one meetings with each one of those guys and helped them overcome their obstacles. Within a week, their performance shot up like a rocket. At the end of two weeks, she called for a meeting again.

“How do you feel now?”

“Real good!” “Everyone’s surprised at our performance.” “They are even jealous!”

“If you continue this good performance, your pranks won’t get you into a big trouble like before. You’ll start earning good incentives. More money in your pockets. New doors would open to you and you can even get promoted! The girls would look at you different... Would you like that?”

With twinkling eyes, zealous heads nodded vigorously.

“Now help your weak team-mates, the ability issue guys, to improve their performance too. You’ve always been smart. Teach them how to be smart too. Let me see how you do it. Surprise me!”

Two months passed by and the team rose to one of the best performing teams in the BU. She called for a meeting again.

“Now that you’ve become one of the top performing teams, let me tell you what’s going to happen now. Life is going to become boring. There’s nothing further than the Number 1 position, only struggle to keep at it. So now, are you going to drop the ball and call it quits to get back to your normal life like before?”

Big eyes flitted at each other in confusion mixed anticipation about what Ritu was going to say next.

“If you go back, everybody is going to say that it was just a passing phase that you achieved Number 1 position. That it was just luck. But was it? Nope. It was your hard and smart work. It was your team spirit – you helped each other rise up and touch the sky. Did you not? The extra bucks you were earning in incentives would go away; the girls would again try to avoid you and people, in general, would again label you as ‘good-for-nothing’. Would you like that?”

Life suddenly felt very bleak to the team.

“So now, you have to choose. Choose between (i) boring life at Number 1 position or (ii) a life where you’re looked upon like scum...” She paused to make them think, then continued, “Or...you can think out of the box and choose option (iii) To learn something new every day, challenge yourself every day and try something new every day.”

“How?”

“Most jobs are monotonous. You have to do the same things over and over and over again. Every day. Sometimes, the whole of your lives! However, it is up to **YOU** what you do with your time. If you can master what you’re supposed to do, you can start doing it in half the time. Once you achieve this level, you take on a new initiative and learn something new. A funny thing about initiatives is that it is not your ‘job’ to do it. So once you learn it, and master it, you can choose to hand it over to someone else and get down to learning something new.”

“What if I get stuck with it and can’t hand it over to someone officially?”

“Then you learn a new skill to raise a volunteer who would take it up as his/her own initiative and relieve you of your initiative duty.”

Her team was still not clear what they were supposed to do, but Ritu wasn't going to spoon-feed them everything. They had to find their own way and she was there to guide them whenever they got stuck or had a doubt.

It had been a few months that she was handling this team and had brought a bit of an order to the mayhem, but her team hadn't completely reformed yet. The willingness issue guys also had no regard for rules and regulations that others readily followed.

One day, the workload from the client increased tremendously and to cope with it, the company declared incentives for those who put in extra working hours. This scheme was to go on for at least two months, during which, the company expected to hire more resource. Every employee wanted to take advantage of this scheme while it lasted. Ritu's team wasn't any different. A couple of days passed and Ritu noticed that two of her team members were pulling off 18 hours each day. They were the willingness issue guys. She was mildly surprised, but soon became wary. This was like a dream come true – too good to be true. She started to keep a close watch on them and realized that the system showed that they would log in and log out at the same time. However, when one was present, the other was nowhere to be seen – throughout the 18 hours! This meant that a single person would log into both their accounts at the same time, handle double the workload for 18 hours straight. The next day, he won't turn up for work and take rest, while the other would log into both their accounts and handle double the workload for 18 hours straight. This was extraordinary because they didn't let the quality of the work drop, but this was also fraud. And they could do this because teams worked in shifts and the office would be completely packed with people working extra, round the clock. Unless one was really looking for it, it couldn't be noticed. But Ritu was looking for it because she knew it in her heart that these boys couldn't become so sincere all of a sudden to pull 18 hours every day. Five days had passed since the naughty boys had started doing this fraud and Ritu escalated it to Avinash. She had to notify a fraud when she caught one. She talked to her team members first, told them that she had to escalate and then escalated. Avinash immediately got HR involved and the two boys were terminated with immediate effect.

A month passed and Ritu got a call from one of her friends in another BU. He had attended one of Freddy's meetings and to his horror, listened to him bad-mouth Ritu in front of everyone. Freddy painted a picture with Ritu as a fraudulent person, a cheat.

"What!" Ritu was horrified. "But why would he think that?"

"I don't know, but that's what he thinks and that's what he's spreading in every meeting every time."

A few more days passed and Ritu confronted Freddy.

"I heard that you think I'm a cheat. Why?"



“Because you are.”

“I know I’m not. Do you have any proof that I’ve cheated?”

“If you weren’t a cheat, then how could two people commit a fraud right under your nose for so many days? You sure must have got a cut from their fraudulent earnings.”

“If that was the case, then why was ‘I’ the person to report it?”

“You wanted to portray yourself as the good guy.”

“That’s not right and I can see in your eyes that you also know it.”

“You’re saying that I’m a liar now?”

“That’s not what I said. But I haven’t committed a fraud. In fact, I’m intolerant toward any fraud. Especially a false accusation. I’m open to any inquiry that anyone may want to initiate.”

Freddy never initiated an inquiry and kept the matter hanging. However, he stopped bad-mouthing against Ritu in the meetings.

A few months passed and Ritu applied for a job posting in another company in the group. She didn’t want growth in this company, but liked working for the Group and still had hopes for a righteous treatment. She cleared the first ‘written test’ round. The second, however, she didn’t clear. A few job posting applications later, she started suspecting that she wasn’t being judged properly. Time and again, she would flunk in rounds she thought she had done well in. She went to the corporate HR to see how she performed against the selection criteria. To their surprise, she had scored more than the set criteria and still didn’t clear the round. The HR asked her if she suspected foul play. Ritu narrated the story about the fraud and what Freddy thought about it. They all knew how influential Freddy was. HR told her that they wanted to initiate an inquiry about her involvement in the fraud and she readily agreed. After a month long inquiry, Ritu was declared innocent.

The first round, the written test, was conducted by HR personnel and Ritu would clear all first rounds of every job posting. So, HR changed the policy and started getting involved in the second round, the group discussion round, as well. That moment on, Ritu started clearing the second round as well, but would flunk in the third. HR changed the policy and started getting involved in the third round, the technical round and Ritu started clearing that round as well, but failing in the next. Finally, Ritu started clearing all rounds except the last one, an interview with the company head. HR couldn’t involve themselves in this round or affect the thinking of the company head about Ritu.

The battle had dragged on for four years and Ritu hadn’t let her performance down even a bit. She was presented with one challenge after the other and she overcame it with perseverance and hard work coupled with new trick every time, but she didn’t get

promoted. Her colleagues and work friends told her that her career was finished here and that she should look for a job switch. Ritu could have done it, but as a person, she couldn't accept a false accusation at any cost. She wanted to fight till her last breath, but four years of fighting later, one day she sat thinking.

*Is this fight worth my time? What am I fighting for? My dignity? My promotion? Respect? Four years of my life have passed by trying to prove my innocence to those who already know it, but are acting otherwise. They are never going to respect me no matter what I do. I'm not going to get promoted here, no matter what I achieve. My team is the best performing team for the past 1.5 years straight! I have proved my innocence. Otherwise, why would the HR change the policy for just one employee? That too, for implementation throughout the whole of the Group?*

She made peace with the situation and moved on. Four years later, she applied for a job in another company and got picked up with a position raise. She got promoted, just like she wanted, but not in the company that she wanted in. The promotion didn't taste sweet either, but for many years to come, she would get promotion after promotion because of the extraordinary work she had done in this first company and the initiatives she had taken and learnt so many things. At the age of 30, she became the CEO of a company, just like she dreamt as a starry-eyed college student.