

The 'Saab' and the citizen.

Who does a bureaucrat work for? Who are his customers? What must he improve? The progress and development of our country is hostage to an increasingly irrelevant breed of bureaucrats, totally capable of destroying any amount of resources, plans and ideas. As a first prerequisite for development, we need to change those who are responsible to bring the much needed change. Alternately we must seriously think about completely getting rid of this utterly wasteful parasitic dead weight. This article is a true life incident that took place in a bureaucrat's office a few weeks back, and reflects the mind set with which a bureaucrat goes about (not) performing his daily routine.

"But why do you want to see him", was the PA's brief and pointed question. "Well I want to say hello to him" I replied in a casual and relaxed tone. This was certainly not the kind of response the PA was used to receiving from people who sought an audience with the CEO of this powerful government office. I could see some level of "not too sure who this guy is" expression on his face. But PA's of bureaucrats are no less expert in the art of their masters. "Can you give me your business card" he quickly recovered and came out with the standard technique used to size up a person's status. "I don't have one" was my brief reply. "Well in that case can you write your name on this chit", was his next demand. "Sure", and I readily complied with this perfectly legitimate requirement. "And please write your designation as well". Now this I thought was going beyond the call of duty. How is it important for the PA of the Chief Collector of cantonment taxes, as to what I do in my office, and what my designation is. "Private Citizen", I scribbled with some degree of satisfaction at not really giving in to this irrelevant demand. Not quite familiar with this designation, the PA decided it was safer to send the chit inside and let the 'Saab' decide if the case warranted an audience.

I was asked to sit down and wait till the 'Saab' was free (enough) to call me. Such waiting periods in a PA's office could be an excellent source of insight into the working of a bureaucrat's office. A PA's office has not just its form, but also a character. The size of the room, the quantity and quality of furniture, the almirahs bulging out with stuffed rain forests, the mountains of mingled files, the PAs entertaining their gossipy guests, and the battalion of peons whose binary lives fluctuate between extremes of inactivity and springing back to life on hearing the 'Saab' operated bell. The bell intended to summon a peon is the ultimate dream gadget of every bureaucrat. There comes a time when a bureaucrat is senior enough to become absolutely redundant and non-functional except for the ability of pressing the bell button located just a few inches away from where the right hand traditionally rests on his mahogany table.

There was never a dull moment in the PA's office. The telephone bell and the 'Saab' operated bell rang at regular intervals. The telephone calls were comfortably disposed off by the PA and the 'Saab' operated bells by the peons. The office seemed to be successfully performing its primary function of acting as an insulating fire wall between the 'Saab' and his department. While one could see hundreds of customers obsequiously hovering on and around clerks in various offices, there were none here to see the big boss. Either he was too high and mighty to be seen by the ordinary public, or simply too irrelevant and cumbersome to be approached.

By now I was getting more familiar with the bell ringing pattern. The bell would ring every two to three minutes, a peon would promptly go inside, receive some instructions and come out. After I had waited for about ten minutes, the bell rang for one more time and the peon as usual dashed in. He came out a few seconds later to announce the glad tidings that it was okay for me to go inside. I opened the door, and stepped in, stopping for a wee second to survey the silence, loneliness and inactivity of this very large sized room. Its sole occupant, the 'Saab' sat on a high chair, across a large empty table,, with half a dozen chairs for visitors on the opposite side. Another portion of the room contained an elegant carpet and a comfortable sofa set, where I imagine the 'Saab' entertained his really important visitors.

I noticed that the 'Saab' was reading (or pretending to read) a file. He looked up for a micro-second and without saying a single word or bringing any change in his cold expression, lowered his gaze back to the piece of literature that he was engrossed in. I was not sure what was the intended message, except that I did not feel entirely welcome and that I seemed to be an obvious interruption in the most profound, and absorbing act (file reading) that the 'Saab' was engaged in. Did he want me to get out, keep standing or come in and sit down. Having not received a clear indication of intent, I exercised my own judgement, walked up to his table, pulled up a chair and parked myself with a hope that my presence, however insignificant would soon make him loose concentration (if not interest) in the file. Clearly I had underestimated his commitment and capacity, as he continued to remain deeply engrossed in the file. (I strongly suspect it was the Scot Adams book on Dilbert Principles, camouflaged in a file cover.) We sat in complete silence for almost eight minutes. I, intently watching for the smallest signs of his body language and facial expressions, he, completely oblivious of the fact that a visitor (and a stranger) sat in front of him waiting to say something.

Finally he lifted his gaze from the file, looked up at me and uttered a single syllable "yes", which is a more economic expression of saying "come

straight to the point and get over it". This also was an indication that the elementary courtesies were not a part of the agenda, and any preliminaries must be set aside. I pulled myself together and tried to say some thing that would give him an idea as to what was I trying to do. "Right, I am an ordinary citizen, and I thought I would spend a few minutes with you, if it is Okay with you, to make a few suggestions about improving this organisation. I also want to clarify that I am not here to get any of my jobs done or seek a favour from your office. So do I begin?". "Yes, but be brief" was his cold and curt reply.

The purpose of my visit was indeed to informally discuss a few suggestions that I thought could be helpful in streamlining the customer related aspects of the organisation. However I had not quite prepared to offer a formal executive summary and that too under utterly unfriendly circumstances. Never the less I chose to go along with the suggested urgency, and make an attempt to be as brief as possible. "There are at least three things you can do to make substantial improvements in your organisation." I came straight to the point. "First, that you could place a large information board at the entrance of the building. This board should state precisely what services do you offer, how does one receive them, and where does one go to receive them. Second, that you could provide customer help desks outside each office, so that customers never have to go inside the offices, and their issues are handled and resolved without any face to face contact with the battalion of clerks. And finally please have a large wooden box marked "Suggestions / Complaints" placed at a prominent place at the entrance of this building. Only you should have the key to that box, and you must personally open it once every week and make sure you take necessary actions to correct the problems and also to prevent their recurrence." Having said all this (almost in a single breath), I waited expectantly for a reaction, response, question or concern. The only response was an uneasy, frozen expressionless stony silence, which was not even attempting to conceal the message that I had been heard and that it was time for me to leave. I got up from my chair, and walked towards the door. Just as I opened the door to step out, I paused for a moment, turned back and said, " Do you appreciate that I am a customer, and a reason for you being in this office. I took my time and effort to come to your office to make some suggestions. The least that you could have done was to say thank you." I closed the door behind me and stepped out into the PA's office. "That is how you must be treated - private citizen", I could hear the PA thinking aloud.

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