

FROM CRISIS TO CHARACTER

Leaping through the waves of calamity

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A collection of published articles based on
Organisational Psychology on how to navigate
day-to-day challenges at work



How Can 'I' Grow

(Personal Growth)

With the increasing technology that allows people to work alone and with more young people joining the workforce looking for career options that fulfill their personal career goals, there is a sense of increasing individualism in the workplace. Persons joining an organisation should be mindful of what the company can offer them and how this can be aligned to their personal goals, so that it becomes a win-win situation. At the same time, organisations have to be mindful of who they want to employ, especially when the job requires working with others.

What It Takes To Succeed

‘Sometimes, it is so hard to manage my team. Some are so competitive and want to be on the top in everything, so much so that I wish I could tie them down to their chairs and make them understand that they need to be team players. Some cannot care less; winning or succeeding does not matter to them at all. They come to work, and they go home, but I can’t say that they are not motivated either. But there is something missing in them. Managing a team with individuals of different levels of motivation is not at all easy’.

The senior manager seems frustrated as he goes through some of the performance reviews. ‘Are people different in the kind of success they seek?’

Achievement motivation (AM) can be seen as a personality characteristic that refers to the strength of an individual’s desire to excel at various tasks, so they can succeed or do better than others. People with high AM avoid performing very difficult tasks that are likely to result in failure; failure may not be the best motivator for them since the more wins they have, the

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more motivated they are. Furthermore, they also tend to stay away from tasks that are too easy; even though they would surely succeed in these tasks, these are not challenging enough for them. By contrast, the opposite is true for persons of low AM. They prefer tasks that are too easy where success is virtually certain, or tasks that are very difficult, because anyone performing them would be expected to fail, thereby being able to justify their failure. This saves much damage to their self-esteem. Even though these differences between persons of high AM and low AM are interesting, the real value of it is to consider them in the context of managerial success.

Are managers with high AM successful managers? Managers of high AM are highly task oriented as they are strongly concerned about getting things done which encourages them to work harder. Given their desire to succeed coupled with hard work, one can speculate that they may attain greater success than others. This is true to a certain extent as they jump-start their careers and gain promotions early in their life. However, their reluctance to tackle difficult tasks may become a problem for their success as they get used to a comfort zone in which they operate and succeed comfortably. Furthermore, they may be so focused on their own individual success that they may not delegate authority to others, thereby, being unpopular amongst their subordinates. Research shows that top executives and CEOs who are high on AM tend to keep organisational power in the hands of a selected few, and eventually fail to empower their teams and improve the ‘bench strength’ of an organisation that is important for effective continuity. At the same time on a positive note, their desire to succeed may encourage them to seek more feedback from others about their performance, which

will help them to address their limitations and reinforce their strengths, so that they can be more effective in their managerial roles.

Do people differ in the kind of success they seek? Yes. Some of us desire to perform well because it satisfies an interest in learning a new skill or meeting a new challenge (learning goal orientation), say starting on a new project that requires you to be trained on a new set of skills. Some of us may want to perform well to demonstrate our competence to others, i.e. wanting to appear as successful as defined by others or the society (performance goal orientation). Certain others may want to achieve in order to avoid being judged by others as incompetent or receiving negative feedback; this might especially be the case with people of low self-esteem (avoidance goal orientation). Finally, there could be some of us who want to merely overcome a limitation, so that we can conquer our own weaknesses, such as pushing ourselves to do presentations because you know that we have a problem with public speaking.

Any company will benefit if it fosters on-the-job feedback and continuous learning. Companies can strategically promote learning cultures that allow individuals to tailor their learning experiences to their own interests (yet be aligned to the company's goals), and adjust these if and when their life situation changes. In order to improve it further, companies can also create an environment in which people are also given the ownership of their learning, opportunity to take calculated risks, and the freedom to make cautious decisions. Companies can improve clear and transparent feedback systems and facilitate a culture of openness.

A self-motivated person high on AM might just not be enough; we might want to find out why people want to achieve, and in what areas they want to achieve, whether they want to achieve alone, or as a team. Motivation alone cannot solve performance problems; the key may lie in how this motivation is extended towards others to communicate, to connect, to collectively achieve and celebrate. Needless to say, social competence, social intelligence, flexibility and adaptability are all important factors that define success.

After all, it's not only about where we get the energy from; it is also about where we channel this energy to.

Character Strengths: Openness to Learning, Humility, Self-Motivation, Self-Confidence, Social Intelligence, Teamwork, Flexibility, Adaptability

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Bankers need to know banking, marketers need to sell, manufacturers need to produce and accountants need to balance accounts. But what is it that would define you? What extra flavour can you bring to the cake in the oven? In this competitive market, maybe one is right to think that what organisations need are more versatile people, more than people who fit only into their respective jobs. How can a banker who is also a dramatist, a marketer and sportsman, a manufacturer and poet, or an accountant who is also a musician, add more value to whatever they do?

Diversity In 'Who You Are!'

Diversity is twofold. One is the most commonly associated notion of diversity of people around us. 'People' is the central issue in workplace diversity. It is focused on the differences and similarities that people bring to an organisation. It is often known to include dimensions which influence the identities and perspectives of people, such as race, gender, age, disabilities, appearance, sexual orientation, profession, education, parental status, geographic location, etc.

The second form of diversity is within us. In this article I would like to talk about the diverse pool of talents, skills and aptitudes we have, and how with the right mind-set and attitude, these could be channelled to achieve our goals.

I was fortunate to have met and worked for a CEO who had a keen intuitive judgment when it came to recruitment. I, being one of the panellists in a management trainee selection procedure, handed him a summarized profile of all the candidates who were to be interviewed for the second time. 'Are these people all-rounders?' I still remember the look on his face as he handed it back to me saying, 'I want a variety of personalities and I don't just need accountants and people with business management degrees here. Where are the science and art graduates?'

'But this business is not about science or art. This is purely based on hard-core commerce and people management.' I responded justifying the panel's decisions.

'So, you mean to say that science and arts students can't learn and be trained in management?' he asked in return and I was speechless.

It was then that I realised that what was needed was a mix of delicacies on the table, the math and the science, the commerce and the arts, and the left and the right brain thinkers, as they brainstorm for new ideas and troubleshoot in problem solving. It is this same CEO who showed me through his recruitment decisions, that a diploma /degree or any knowledge base is only a reasonable point of entry, and that what qualifies an individual is something much more.

The variety and diversity within a person is triggered by the function of both the left and right brain. Left brain functions are more to do with logic, parts and specifics, analysis (breaking things apart), and sequential thinking. On the other hand, the right brain functions include emotions, pictures, wholes and relationships between parts, synthesis (putting things together), simultaneous and holistic thinking. Left brain is more to do with words and numbers, and right brain is more to do with pictures, colours and rhythms. So, which side are you predominantly?

Even though we have a tendency to gravitate to one end due to our work in a particular area for a long period of time, we have the capacity to improve and develop what does not come across to us naturally or as a 'preferred area.' The reasons for this are part of our evolution and are necessary for survival. And for survival, it is obvious that we need both the logical, analytical, sequential, objective specifics, and also the intuitive, random, rhythmic, pictorial specifics, to

interpret, understand, differentiate and take action accordingly.

Now, let's explore why a manager or any practitioner who has developed both sides of the brain can be a league ahead. Management is about using logic but it is also about managing feelings and emotions. As much as it is about details and facts, it is also about imagination and seeing the bigger picture. Equally important is the need for practical strategies and intuitive possibilities.

This is the reason behind the recruitment of 'all-rounders' who seem to demonstrate in their CVs a solid educational background along with evidence of extracurricular activities that boast of their cultural activities, creativity or sports.

Personal development is about progressing in all areas and testing or experimenting what is unknown. This allows our thinking to expand so we would know more about ourselves. Different parts of the brain are dedicated to different functions and tasks. Hence, we would never know our talent, skill or liking, if we don't try. It is about being open to new experiences and stretching our boundaries. The first step is about getting out of the comfort zone-the way we know it. Tap, tap: you never know what you may find on the other side of your brain.

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LEFT BRAIN FUNCTIONS	RIGHT BRAIN FUNCTIONS
• Logic driven	• Feeling and emotion driven
• Analysis	• Synthesis
• Looks at details	• Looks at bigger picture
• Likes facts	• Likes imagination
• Likes words and language	• Likes symbols and images
• Focuses on present and past	• Focus on present and future
• Knows	• Believes
• Acknowledges	• Appreciates
• Order/Pattern perception	• Spatial perception
• Forms strategies	• Forms possibilities
• Practical	• Spontaneous
• Safe	• Risk taking
• Time bound	• Time free and tends to lose sense of time

Character Strengths: Courage, Appreciation of One's Capacity to Grow

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This is not new to us; at the dawn of every year we wish we could reach a greater height, be more focused at work or studies, be more conscious about what we eat, lose weight, save more and spend less, find more time for our loved ones and so the list goes on. Despite our efforts and ardent commitment to become better, research consistently shows that only 8% of us successfully achieve and maintain our New Year resolutions past six months.

The remaining 92%? Well the New Year resolution cycle may be renewed every 365 days, with spurts of success every now and then, only to fade off way too quickly. But the truth is, change is hard- but you probably know that already.

New Year Resolutions: Identity Based Goals

What kind of resolutions should we make to maximise the effectiveness in the workplace in the New Year? In our line of work, it is not rare to have clients, be it a student or a professional, who would be seeking advice on how to stick to their goals. Neomal, a recent client, had to learn it the hard way when he was not given a promotion due to his laid-back attitude in attending meetings on time- the only requirement that worked against him.

This seemed negligible for a person who has a rich network of people, performs over and above his team and who is outstanding in his decision-making and problem solving. But sometimes the organisational world leaves no room for error. So yes, it was his resolution this year to be punctual.

In the first stage of goal setting, we have to ask the question “Why”? Why are we setting this goal? Is it out of a personal value or is it out of fear or guilt? Why didn't we succeed last time? What needs to change about us if it is to work this time? Often goals and resolutions fail because the supporting reason for that goal is not strong enough.

Goals can be appearance-based, performance-based or identity-based. Say you want to manage your time better at work. An appearance-based goal (superficial goal) is based on ‘I want others to notice that I am punctual’.

A performance-goal is rested on ‘I want to arrive five minutes early for the meetings at least 90 per cent of the time’. Going much deeper in its roots, an identity-based goal is founded on your own identity i.e. ‘I am the type of person who is disciplined to achieve whatever I set my mind to, such as to be on time for meetings because I respect my time and other's time’.

When you focus on creating a new identity first, you provide the key to building lasting habits based on that identity. Your goals are successful when you are able to create habits consistent with your identity. Even though there are different views on how long it may take for a habit to form, on average a habit takes six weeks to form and it takes up to six months for them to be part of your regular life style. During this time one needs support, encouragement and accountability provided by a manager, spouse, family member, mentor, colleague, coach or a friend. SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound) is a guideline when setting goals that can be measured within a time frame. A SMART goal will be to read at least eight business articles a month, which is on average two articles a week, and to utilise daily travel time to read.

Here are some tips for individual goal setting. Define the person you want to become and the purpose you want to fulfill through your work. Make one or two strong goals and create plans to meet them. Think about your career, personal life, finances, personal growth, health and social life. Stop taking criticism personally and turn off complaining and justifying. Start a kudos file. Take a real vacation. Stretch yourself. And plan to be world-class in everything you do. Some of the tips for

managerial goal setting would be to have a mind-set of a person of influence. Define the type of manager you want to become. Define the purpose you want to fulfill through your career and work. Define your long term contribution as a leader. Set clear goals. Look back at the past 12 months. Think about what your team should not be spending their time on. Have performance reviews, give and receive more feedback, encourage collaborative goal setting, and appreciate, acknowledge and reward when employees achieve their goals.

Most people (myself included) will want to become better this year but every now and then, we will get enticed to adopt a wrong focal point. Decide the type of person you want to become, and prove it to yourself with small wins.

With small incremental steps, the goal is not to achieve results at first, but to become the type of person who can achieve those results. Goal setting is an opportunity to redefine your identity and young or old, we know that a fine identity paves the way to a solid character. So now we know where to focus.

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Character Strengths: Determination, Perseverance

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Who we are, defines what we do. Titles are mere labels of identity that serve a purpose given the context. We know that titles are not forever, but what we do or our service to others can affect the course of history. We may not ever be able to tell where our influence would stop.

Going 'Beyond The Title'

Think about some of the titles you have? How have you come to acquire them? And how about the labels you have tagged onto others?

Look around and you will find titles and labels for everything. They simplify our world. They help us to categorise an overwhelming amount of information, thereby greatly helping us to process information easily and fairly quickly. However, forget not that titles demand that one plays a role which is either explicitly or implicitly defined. First, think of a manager's job description that lists the job specifications, and now think of all the undocumented tasks a manager is expected to fulfill by the organisation, in an implied psychological contract.

We have titles for a reason. In the workplace, the building blocks of an organisational structure are the positions and the titles that come with them. This gives order and helps organisations to have a sense of control over who is doing what. It also helps companies to plan, structure and restructure, place authority, freedom and power, so that leadership becomes clear. Titles are important in attracting the right person with the right set of skills and attitudes in selection, in succession planning, career guidance and performance management.

Titles are important and serve their purpose as expected, till we get overly identified with them and the roles that come with them. On a negative note, they can be used to one's advantage as a power tool to coerce people. They render definitions of who we are and a self-image that makes us feel important and powerful. With

titles, functions and roles also comes role-playing. It was not until recently that I was completely blown away by the realisation of how we role play when we go to see a doctor. My mother has been battling with an unidentified illness for months. Feeling utterly frustrated by the lack of time and empathy some consultants now allocate for each patient, it was not until we took her to the most recent consultant (12th doctor for your record), that I realised how profoundly embedded role-playing is in this profession.

When we meet a physician, we become the patient. The patient talks first and then the physician talks. The patient listens and what the physician says becomes gospel truth. Sometimes, when we try to question them further, the physician becomes restless and is eager to finish writing the prescription. Shocking is the little attention to detail certain physicians are able to mobilise nowadays, leading them to misdiagnose and order the wrong operation, which was evident in this current example. Luckily, we wanted to seek a 12th opinion.

There are exceptions to the rule; when we met the last consultant, who took 15 minutes to listen to my mother's complaints and to read all the past records and outputs of the MRI (as opposed to the one prominent output read by most of the other doctors), we were astounded by his humble approach. How scarce is such a quality that is almost fundamental in treating people? This doctor, in his most humane service, opened our eyes to what true professionalism in medicine is all about. For him, my mother was not a mere patient in his consultation list; my mother was a human being reaching out for his expertise.

Globally speaking, complete identification with a title or a role makes human interactions unauthentic, dehumanised and alienating. The functions people have in hierarchical organisations such as the military, government sectors or a large corporation, easily lend themselves to becoming role identities. In such role identities where people may get lost in their roles, it is almost impossible to be who we are and do what needs to be done to the best of our ability.

So what can you do to not lose yourself in our titles and roles? It is not about how you define yourself to others, but how you define yourself to you. You can begin by defining yourself as a human being, as opposed to an accomplished designation. Your qualifications, training and prestigious titles only partially speak of who you are. You are much bigger than a title that says lawyer, accountant, professor, sir or CEO, or MBA, MBBS, LLB or PhD. Also, think about your roles as temporary and that you have to leave these titles behind one day. It is always good not to get too attached to anything that makes you lose yourself in them.

Titles and labels are limiting. They require us to act in a way so we could belong to a particular category, thereby conforming to the norms surrounding them. This hinders true authenticity which has a huge bearing on how we relate to others and how satisfied we are with

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ourselves. It is the call of duty and not the call of title that matters in any profession. Titles have their time and place and serve a purpose in that time and place only.

In your mind, you may find that not giving yourself a label is much more liberating, as it opens up many avenues to be whoever you want to be. Of course you can strive for titles that speak of your achievements, but let them be something that speaks of what you do in your professions rather than of who you are.

Character Strengths: Humility and Modesty, Authenticity, Humanity (Love and Kindness)

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The Ultimate Battle With The Ego

There is a fundamental difference between a big ego and a big ambition. Most successful people may have started off with big aspirations, an insatiable drive and a normal healthy level of confidence that would have pushed their goals towards victory.

One should take caution, for ego has a mind of its own and if one is not careful, given the right circumstances, it can use success to create an illusion that one alone has achieved this success, thereby converting the healthy confidence to an unhealthy ego.

We may have come across people who are obstinate, arrogant and self-righteous people who may think 'my way or no way'. We may have tried to change them and make them realise that this is not always good.

One of the main problems in dealing with such people is that they simply do not want to see the bigger picture or see things from a different point of view. This is understandable, as the seed of conceit is deep seated, almost always invisible to the individual. But how is it that they do not want to even consider it when feedback is given about their blind spot?

'Ego. Too much? Too little? How much is just enough?'

These are questions we all need to answer for ourselves. In this article ego is mentioned as a negative concept as opposed to self-esteem or confidence. Ego is not an easy concept to explain or understand, so bear with me.

Today, I would like to share with you some important highlights from a conversation I once shared with a self-made entrepreneur. Whilst thanking him for allowing me to use this story, I would name him as Tim in order to preserve confidentiality.

I first met Tim at a conference in Dubai. He introduced himself as the Managing Director of an

advertising company. Whilst reading my business card, Tim looked up and asked me. 'Honestly, what do you think it is like to work for an egomaniac?'

'It must be difficult'. I answered slightly amused by his question.

He added. 'What if that egomaniac is you? I don't know how my guys put up with me, sometimes', to which I laughed out loud and replied 'at least you are aware of it'. During the break, we decided to talk about 'ego at work' over a cup of coffee.

My acquaintance was an ambitious man in his late forties; a man who started off with big ideas when he formed his company with a team of five creative minds, twelve years previous. 'I built it all by myself' (mark those words), he commented. Now, it was a company that had branched out to many regions with almost 500 staff members. Tim said that somewhere down the line, his ambition became an incessant voice in his head that wanted more success; more or less similar to a constant nagging that life was not good enough. How could one explain that? Maybe the exponential growth of his achievement created an illusion that he alone achieved all that success. The healthy level of confidence was now turning into a big ego. This big ego was wanting to grow bigger and bigger through further identification of accomplishment and ownership of all the glamour and the glory. But we all know that a grand idea will take us nowhere if we do not have an excellent team to execute an excellent plan.

Issues of ego are not openly spoken about at work. We talk mostly about topics such as leadership,

communication, teamwork or decision-making. However, underlying the effectiveness of all these concepts is the sensitive issue of ego, which invariably decides our overall competence. Maybe it is time we look at 'ego training', where we train ourselves to consistently maintain a healthy level of confidence and self-esteem. I personally believe that it is a superior skill and an attitude combined.

We may not have an over-inflated ego in all sectors of life all the time. Tim said that his ego overtook him, especially when providing direction and in decision-making at work. When asked as to how he first realised that his ego was not healthy, he said that he could not overlook how competitive he would get when comparing himself with other directors. He said that at times, he would defend himself and his decisions at any cost. Moreover, he added that even without realizing it, he would seek acceptance from 'significant others' or boast about his past successes in the boardroom and coerce people to buy into his plans. He would often criticize another director's strategies and prematurely discard them as irrelevant.

Some senior managers I have met, have claimed that ego-struggles are very common at all levels of the organisation. We are inundated with examples from politics or from different ethnic and religious groups. Any war is a result of an ego struggle be it individual or collective; one person against another, one group against another group, I against you, we against them.

Food for thought: perhaps, this is what makes one who is ambitious to achieve something good to become fanatical, or one who is determined to become inflexible.

The ego identifies with glamorous definitions of 'I, myself and me' and thrives on the ownership of power titles and designations. It would like to fight for any cause that would bring it importance. It wants, craves, complains and resents and once it had found an identity of power, it does not want to let go. It also can have an over-identification with materialism. Ego has to preserve itself. Thus one could demonstrate defensive behaviour, denial, justification and even withdrawal or passive behaviour in the face of external criticism. It confuses views and opinions with facts and is most dangerous when one wants to see things as they are.

A mismanaged ego could result in destructive emotions that would not be the most conducive for sustainable performance in any area of work. Some senior managers I have met, have claimed that ego-struggles are very common at all levels of the organisation. We are inundated with examples from politics or from different ethnic and religious groups. Any war is a result of an ego struggle- be it individual or collective; one person against another, one group against another group, I against you, we against them.

Is there hope? Is there anything we can do to curtail the negative impact of a bloated ego?

The first step in any form of reformation is awareness. If there is no awareness, there is no choice for change either. Awareness of self, paves the way to personal growth. Awareness comes from within and from others. Hence, reflecting on our behaviour and its consequences, whilst considering the others' feedback would be a good starting point.

If we want to grow, we then have to allow life to shake and break our ego. Battling with the ego-how prepared are we to face our biggest enemy? How equipped are we to fight the greatest obstacle that stands in the way of inner growth, self-development, and the quest to become a better leader, better citizen or a better human being? And we think that enemies are only outside of us!

Character Strengths: Humility and Modesty, Authenticity

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