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ICMA Pakistan: COVID-19 has redefined the role of a corporate leader. What do you say?

WZ: COVID-19 has brought major changes in the mindset of corporate leaders. The CEOs, who used to pay lip-service to the well being and safety of the employees before the pandemic, had to prioritize it by focusing on 'people first' policy and keeping the revenues, business plans, customer orders, e-deliveries, etc as their second priority. I am especially talking about those companies which are in the export business. So, the safety of people, SOPs, safeguards and physical arrangements became the priority of CEOs

during the pandemic. Secondly, the CEOs had to make revisions and adjustments in their routine official activities such as traveling, meetings, etc. Thirdly, the CEOs who used to be quite impatient to get quick results leading to late sittings of employees, developed more patience after the pandemic with a marked reduction in their control levels as they realized that they do not have much control over everything now. Lastly, the CEOs had to think 'out of the box' and adjust to the needs of 'working from home' and parallel processing. These emerging needs forced them to create an altogether new parallel set-up of the working environment.

Exclusive Interview

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ICMA Pakistan: How important is 'adaptive leadership' in the post-COVID-19 scenario?

WZ: Firstly, it needs to be understood that we are not in 'post-COVID', rather we are 'in-COVID' and this pandemic is expected to continue during 2020, 2021 and maybe till the second or third quarter of 2022 by when a large population would get vaccinated from COVID-19.

I feel that people are gradually returning to their comfort zones, especially the threshold of the patience of the CEOs, who were earlier in the mood of 'people first' or 'people safety first', is coming down due to lack of revenues by sticking to an actual business and not opting for replacement and business diversification. Many exporting companies who, on the contrary, adopted alternate business models and went into the manufacture of PPEs and Facemasks, are successful to some extent. Hence, continuity of adaptability and adaptability leadership assumes much significance now given the impending challenges.

ICMA Pakistan: In prevailing testing times, who can be singled out as the 'successful corporate leader'?

WZ: Well, a successful corporate leader in present testing times would be one who keeps a delicate balance between humanity and uncertainty; between people and results; can generate options for diversification, both in terms of products and services; and can create new delivery platforms. Further, a successful leader would be one who utilizes his best creativity, innovation, and adaptability skills in business in the present crisis.

ICMA Pakistan: What new leadership skills are required to surmount the present corporate challenges?

WZ: I think the primary skill required at the moment is the 'delegation skill' as the leaders and CEOs who were able or used to perform many tasks, would now realize that these are not possible in present circumstances and they need to delegate them down in the corporate ladder. Secondly, a leader must inculcate or use his 'innovative skill' to generate options. If he comes across any roadblock, he may sit with his team and find the best possible fix or solution by using the decision making and problem-solving criteria. Thirdly, a leader must also develop the skill to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity as it is possible that patience and trial and error policy may not work in the present scenario. Finally, the basic 'productivity skill' also need to be upskilled as the leaders and CEOs are now mostly operating from their homes from where they do not have such effective control over the 'interruptions' while they were at their workplaces. So, I think it is more important now to deal with the interruptions and to focus on work at home.

ICMA Pakistan: How stress and fear, arising from COVID-19, are likely to impact the performance of employees?

WZ: Covid-19 is certainly a formidable challenge medically because of the fact that people are becoming sick, hospitalized, and dying from the pandemic. Its only cure is a vaccine that would be developed in the next 18 months i.e. by July 2021 and it may take further one-year upto July 2022. The second aspect is the impact on the business as airline, hotel, and restaurant industry and people having businesses in the physical space have incurred huge losses.

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The most significant challenge, however, is related to the 'mental health' of people, as identified by you. Though this challenge is not so obvious at present as the medical and business challenges; however, it is brewing fast. The stress and fear arising from the pandemic is likely to reduce the morale, well-being, and mental health of the employees and may lead to anxiety and depression. If the employees are not counseled and stress management techniques are also not available to them, it would affect their efficiency and performance; they would not be focused; not able to meet deadlines and keep the customers centric. This would also affect their temperament that could harm their relationships with family members or office colleagues and also bring down their Emotional Quotient (EQ).

ICMA Pakistan: Remote working is now the new norm. How a leader should manage people and keep them engaged?

WZ: Remote working or work from home is now the 'new norm'. Being in the USA at present, I have observed that many companies have allowed their staff to work from home for the lifetime. Twitter and Facebook have allowed their staff to work from home 'forever' or permanently. Many companies are following 'Flexi' policy i.e. allowing staff to work some time from the office and also from their homes. I have also observed that many companies, having regular work, have also permitted work from home. I think that even if the COVID-19 goes away, we would not return to the previous era when one used to only work from the office. Work from home will be the new norm forever.

You have asked how people should be managed or motivated, I am of the view that motivation is produced from meaningful work or as it is called 'meaning from work'. Money, salary, micro, and over management of boss are not all real motivating factors, rather most of them are demotivators.

As far as engaging the employees is concerned, this comes from meaningful work and autonomy. Work from home is a good opportunity in which the employee has the liberty of Flexi working hours, Flexi working methods, autonomy to

deliver work to the boss, and operating in a lesser boss-control environment. This autonomy would keep the employee engaged in work and deliver. In fact, this autonomy is the best tool for working at the office and home.

ICMA Pakistan: How virtual meetings have affected the 'interpersonal dynamics' of leaders and employees?

WZ: I think it is Zoom fatigue. A lot of meetings are being held online and due to lack of face-to-face contact, people usually switch-off their camera and do some other work; maybe they are not concentrating or are having part listening. A virtual meeting has its downsides, especially in lengthy meetings, because everyone does not possess the right training and skill to speak very focused. Secondly, in virtual meetings, you are unable to watch the other person closely and observe their emotions. Also, in Pakistan, there are problems with internet connectivity such as sound breaks; freezing of video, noise interruptions, etc. which may create misunderstandings. I would suggest that the leader may communicate 'action points' in text format to the team members to avoid such misunderstanding emanating from the virtual meetings.

ICMA Pakistan: As a leading leadership trainer, do you think leadership in Pakistani organizations are prepared enough to cope up with the emerging challenges in the backdrop of economic slowdown and recession?

WZ: Generally, Pakistan is a low performing economy which means that even in the best of circumstances, our exporters are not performing upto the mark.

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“ Many organizations are doing good business but due to poor margins and negative cash flows, they can collapse at any point in time ”

Our domestic production and consumption are quite a low vis-à-vis our growth in population. In fact, ours is a small economy as compared to other countries and with the increase in the dollar, our economy now stands below 300 billion. So, in terms of economy and GDP growth, we are not performing well. Though the Government's ineptness is a key contributing fact for unimpressive economic performance, I feel that our businesses are also not performing as expected from them. The fact of the matter is that our businesses, in general, are always on the lookout for rebates and preferential policies to do business. For instance, many people abandoned their main businesses and diverted to the 'real estate' as this sector has a promising future with lucrative incentives expected from the Government. I think this is not an appreciable situation for our business leaders. Though I do not want to be sounding a critic, I cannot say as to what these leaders can do in the absence of a business-level playing field. However, leadership in many organizations performed very well despite the prevailing circumstances as they kept consistency; went into expansions, made collaborations, and therefore, their revenue growth improved. Such leaderships are quite rare in Pakistan and so I think we need more risk orientation and we need more product-led or service-led corporate leadership, rather connection or government incentive-led leadership.

ICMA Pakistan: What leading role professional accountants must play in organizations in present uncertain times?

WZ: A positive aspect of professional accountants is that they fulfill the needs of their employers, whether those are tax-related or non-tax related requirements. In the present circumstances, I think they can play a more vibrant role in the areas of diversification, working capital management, and scenario planning.

In Pakistan, very few organizations are in surplus with good savings whereas the majority of organizations have high

receivables or payables to suppliers and customers. I think the role of professional accountants become more important in the sense that they can suggest 'out of box' options to help organizations in better planning, improving cash flows, and in overall money management. In the present COVID-19 scenario, the accountants have a special role in creating a balance between 'lack of revenues' and 'expense side' where there is a large workforce in organizations with revenues not flowing from customers and still you have to manage payrolls and payment of benefits to the staff. This is really challenging and I am sure the professional accountants are doing this remarkable job, in organizations where there are no lay-offs.

ICMA Pakistan: Any message to students of ICMA Pakistan who are aspiring to become strategic leaders in organizations after completing their studies?

WZ: My advice to the students of ICMA Pakistan would be that they should think like Chinese Accountants or like the owners of shrewd communities. Their focus should be on how to improve revenues and optimize costs and expenses. Cash flows and money management are vital for the progress and continuity of the life cycle of an organization. Many organizations are doing good business but due to poor margins and negative cash flows, they can collapse at any point in time.

So, I think your role as a student is vital and you should prepare yourself from today. You must create your value so that your organization realizes that you have a strong footprint. Moreover, one day you can become the CEO of an organization and in that role, you have to change your hat i.e. today you are 'money saver' and as a CEO you have to become 'money spender'. You must also prepare yourself for flexibility.

The Editorial Board thanks Mr. Wali Zahid, International Consultant, Speaker, Leadership Trainer and Executive Coach for giving his exclusive interview for Management Accountant Journal.