

The secret formula

Vivek Talwar, who has guided two Tata companies towards the JRD QV award, shares his methods and his thoughts on the how-to of business excellence

Does Vivek Talwar have a secret formula for winning the JRD QV award? Several people seem to think so. After all he has been at the helm of the business excellence programme at not one but two Tata companies that have won the coveted quality award — Tata Chemicals in 2007 and more recently Tata Power in 2009. In fact, one of the first comments that Mr Talwar heard on the evening of July 29, 2009, when it was announced that this year's winner was Tata Power, was: "Hey, looks like you managed to crack the code!"

The code refers to the Tata Business Excellence Model (TBEM), an intensive methodology that looks at a company's operations both from a holistic perspective as well as through a detailed, penetrative analysis. It is certainly no piece of cake. Since the model was introduced more than a decade ago as the definitive methodology for quality and performance improvement, only nine Tata companies have managed to cross the 600-mark that is recognised with a JRD QV award.

The very fact that Tata Chemicals and Tata Power have both managed to get the trophy, leads one to enquire gently of Mr Talwar: Is there a secret path through the intricacies of the Tata Business Excellence

Model? An invisible key that takes companies across the magic line of 600 points in TBEM?

"No, no, there is no secret code or key," laughs Mr Talwar, "and it is not something that an individual can achieve on one's own. It needs a leader who believes in the power of the model and drives its adoption throughout the organisation passionately; a leadership team that takes that belief into their areas of influence and an organisation that responds to this with a sense of ownership, pride and commitment."

The leader, in the case of Tata Power is managing director Prasad Menon, the man on the top. This office is where it all starts, where the organisation gets its first push on the journey, and business excellence is clearly stated as a must-do deliverable. The leadership is the senior management and the directors, who take the message to their respective teams. The organisation... now, that is where Mr Talwar's magic comes to play.

He sees his role primarily as a trainer and communicator, rather than head of quality. "You can't push quality down people's throats. The need for it has to come from within. And if you can create that need, that desire for change, then there is a pull rather than a push," says Mr Talwar, who believes that business excellence,

organisational development and organisational transformation are different perspectives to a common horizon.

While all that makes perfect sense in management textbooks, how does one apply it to an organisation that employs thousands of people in multiple sites across the country and overseas? Especially since, as Mr Talwar asserts, business excellence, or indeed any organisational transformation movement, has to be inclusive, not exclusive, not limited to the domain of a few specialist managers in a company. "Business excellence has to be about people. In Tata Power and in Tata Chemicals, people across line,



Vivek Talwar initiating teammates on the intricacies of business excellence

level, domain and age group were a part of the process,” he says.

To create a sense of urgency and passion for business excellence, Mr Talwar uses the following principles, methods and processes which work very well:

Evoked a sense of pride

Any step towards change has to come from the people. “You have to energise the people and create a sense of pride and ownership in the company. Then they become the agents of change, the drivers of excellence,” says the man whose designation also accurately describes his mission in the company — vice-president, organisational excellence and transformation. “One of the starting points every year in the annual business excellence journey is the co-creation of an understanding on what makes us feel proud about Tata Power, and what needs to be done to take us to the next higher levels of excellence,” adds Mr Talwar.

How does he do this? The first step is to create a fraternity of change agents, an ever-widening pool of quality champions who in turn spread the message through the length and breadth of the organisation, and also ensure that the principles of excellence are deeply embedded in people’s attitudes towards work and the organisation.

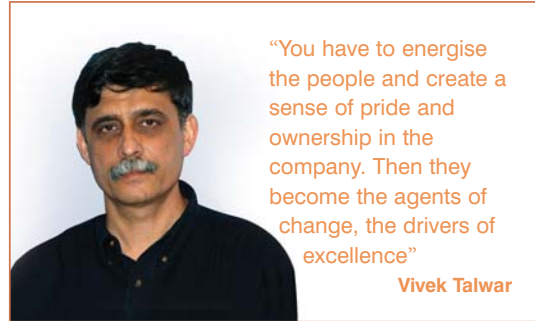
Identify the champions

At Tata Power there are about 150-200 people who form four different teams — the business excellence team, the application-writing team, the organisational preparedness team and the progressive internal assessment team. Each team has a unique role to play; yet the team members also split up and form smaller teams to handle specific tasks.

The teams change from year to year, with about 30-40 per cent constituting new members. This is done so that fresh thoughts are captured, and an organisation-wide resource pool is created. “In this company, people don’t think of business excellence as an additional chore; they don’t try and avoid being a part of these teams. In fact they are keen for the job. I have a tough time convincing people who are to make way for new faces,” says Mr Talwar.

Cut through the jargon

The next step is to demystify and simplify the TBEM model. “I have found that line managers will take to business excellence initiatives only when they understand how it makes business sense to them, to their work. Honestly, the language in the Blue Book (the TBEM manual) is something that most line managers find intimidating, unless they have undergone some kind of TBEM training,” says Mr Talwar. He conducts



workshops throughout the year where he takes groups of managers through 25 simple questions.

The questions range from basic ones (What is your name? What is your job?) that bring out core functions and competencies, and progresses to slightly more thought-provoking explorations (How do you know that you are doing your job well? How do you monitor progress? How can you do your job better? Who are your customers? Does your department get impacted if your leader goes on leave? Why not? etc) that result in a free and open discussion of performance metrics, empowerment and tools for improvement. The end result is an understanding of the principles of business excellence.

Co-create

What comes out of these workshops is the knowledge of where the company stands today, where it would like to be tomorrow and how to get there. “This knowledge is entirely co-created. It comes from the people themselves and is not something that has been defined elsewhere and forced on them,” says Mr Talwar who believes this feeling of ownership is critical to the journey of business excellence.

Make it fun

There is another element that he uses to keep the motivation strong: fun. All presentations and learning sessions have an element of humour running through them. Often, the teams meet not in conference rooms but offsite. For example, every year in January the application-writing team (about 22-24 strong) spends a week offsite discussing and debating what will be written down in Tata Power’s JRD QV application. The unique approach blends working hard with having loads of fun. The team camps for a week in tents on the shores of a lake in Walwhan, near Lonavla, Maharashtra; brainstorming and concept creation is balanced with treks, barbecue dinners, games, cocktails and bonfires. Out in the lake, last year, was a buoy with a large banner that proudly said ‘Tata Power, World Class by 2010’.

The team gets an accurate fix on where the organisation stands, what it needs to do to achieve the



The Tata Power application-writing team 2008 takes a break from work and goes for a trek

next level of performance improvement and the timetable for the change. On the last day, the company's senior management joins the team and hears a series of presentations on the plans and targets for the year. "The TBEM application-writing team has a clear mandate: Writing the application, becoming drivers of change, suggesting organisational development interventions, learning from each other, learning from invitees and having fun," says Mr Talwar, "And we go for broke on all these aspects."

Put it on paper

One week after the team comes back, they start writing the actual application. This is then continuously updated with information from the other teams, including the organisational preparedness and the progressive internal assessment teams. Over the next few months, the entire organisation maps itself to the plans and targets defined on a cold January day by the lake. Care is taken to ensure that nothing is done in the organisation just for the TBEM assessment. "We are not interested in putting anything in place in the organisation that is merely for the TBEM assessment. What we propose are imperatives for moving to higher levels of excellence. Ours is a benchmark process," says Mr Talwar who also spends a lot of his time taking other Tata companies through the process.

Make it sustainable

All of these are elements that also go a long way to making the business excellence journey a sustainable exercise, involving a large number of people in the line and domain functions who are committed to driving the message. "We are not looking at it from an award point of view, but from a 'where do we want to be' point of view. And each year the bar is raised," says Mr Talwar.

Also the process is people-specific and not industry-specific. The language of business excellence is the same and works equally well in any company. What gives weight to Mr Talwar's belief is the very fact that he has been able to master and re-express this language in a format that is more easily absorbed.

Win the trophy!

The effectiveness of Mr Talwar's method of incubating and inculcating the business excellence mindset among the company's people can best be described by the TBEM scores of Tata Chemicals and Tata Power. When Prasad Menon moved to Tata Power in 2007 and an internal assessment showed its TBEM score had moved to an abysmal low, Vivek Talwar moved as well to recreate his magic.

In 2009, when Tata Power won the JRD QV award, there were scenes of joy and tears. Some of the biggest claps were heard in Mithapur and Babrala with Mr Talwar getting congratulatory calls from old friends. In Tata Power, several of the team broke down and cried when the company that had for years struggled with its business excellence programme cruised past the 600 milestone, thus validating the effort put in over the years.

What makes the journey of these two companies even more remarkable is the fact that Vivek Talwar is actually an architect by training and experience who landed in Mithapur 25 years ago to develop a model for integrated community development. After donning the corporate hat, Mr Talwar moved into human resources and worked on TBEM from an HR perspective. It has been only in the last four years that he has taken on the larger role of implementing TBEM for the entire organisation. Says Mr Talwar, "In both Tata Chemicals and Tata Power, the most important common factor was Prasad Menon. He is a leader who never defines the steps — he only articulates aspirational goals with the belief that he has the best team in the world that can deliver unbelievable targets. Winning the JRD QV award is not an end in itself. It is just the first step for us. Tata Power has aspirations to be a world-class organisation in operational excellence and I feel I have a role to play in this defining stage of our journey."

Ask Mr Talwar what lies ahead on his personal horizon, and the answer is unexpected. "Fishing! I love to fish, and one of these days, the business excellence and organisational transformation movement here will not need me any more. My job here will be done, and I will be doing all that I have held back for so long — camping alone on the shores of a remote lake where an occasional golden trout leaps out of the water and catches the sunlight on its arched back. And coming back to civilisation with one more story of the one that got away!" ●

Gayatri Kamath