

## **PLANTING: THE BEST JOB ON EARTH! [Provided you are focused, up to date & relevant]**

*“The best job on earth?” “How on earth can you possibly say so?” A young planter-now about to leave planting and seek city life instead, turned towards me incredulously? “That may have been during your time, but now planting sucks”, the young man continued with his depressing negativity. I persisted and calmly responded. “Look at the pure air you breath; the crystal-clear water you drink and indeed bath in; the aroma of fresh vegetables growing luxuriantly in your garden – a garden of Eden with its greenery all round – solid old trees, some of them bearing fruit of all possible varieties and then the ‘real’ organic home-grown stuff that people in cities would swap a limb, to enjoy! Then the stillness: being surrounded by nature’s bounties; you have time to reflect, to focus, instead of the revolting cacophony of ‘sound pollution’ that we folk eking out a living in cramped cities have to endure!”, yours truly implored.*

That got the young planter thinking. Thankfully he remained silent. *“The richest people on earth are those living amidst nature in all its splendor and those who respect it. They know the rules of nature, not set by any human but by the Supreme Creator Himself. So doesn’t a planter live in paradise?”*

Besides a planter worth his salt could plan, think creatively and indeed make things happen. 30 to 40 years ago none spoke about KPIs and KRAs; about ‘effective delegation’; top down or bottom-up communication; vision, mission, ‘balanced score-card’ etc. Yet they effectively made ‘things happen’.

The Manager of a large plantation then was in effect the CEO of a large business enterprise. The Manager then did not have computers & printers; scanners and photo-copiers; there were no ERP solutions; no HR Managers, no Manager Talent Retention, IT geeks, no Manager Finance, Manager this and Manager that! No MYOBE Accounting Software, instead only Checkrolls and CR books but tons of can-do-it attitude; they enthusiastically discussed their plans with their staff and workers in their respective languages; importantly they built trust – it was mutual. 100 acres of tea being re-planted in just one year was routine; no worthy, crunching numbers whilst warming their revolving seats would pontificate that “New Clearings cannot be done” as its ROI was negative impacting on the GP & NP ratios! Planters then relied on their God-given common-sense. And they mostly delivered. And how!

Today, sadly there’s ‘Information over-load’ via emails, Smartphones, Notebooks, Tablets etc; ironically a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and common sense! It’s perhaps a case of too many cooks spoiling the soup; that maybe explains the inaction by some RPCs towards replanting, new planting, alternate forms of energy; resource identification towards producing those matching global demand – the list goes on. Yet many RPCs seem rooted to age-old thinking and negativism whilst conversely non-traditional planter a.k.a. Small-Holder goes on new planting and indeed re-planting unhesitatingly! From a trivial input in the ‘60s Small Holders deliver 70% of National Tea production!

Reverting to the sad reality of planter migration to other unrelated pursuits, is that too many young planters are distracted by the lures of so-called modern life and blinded by the glittering lights and lofty corporate titles that are attached to some menial job or the other? I do recall quite a number of successful planters who left their ‘*Thotams*’ and uprooted themselves from friends and relatives to set up shop in say Australia or Canada, starting off as bus drivers, clerks, window cleaners, gardeners, garbage collectors, security guards etc. There’s ‘Dignity of Labour’ in those parts – nothing wrong with

such work. Yet, leaving a PD's job for that?? Come on! Be truthful! Of course – a small minority made it good; yet by and large many gave up 'top planting billets' only to end up growing old prematurely and distressingly, drained emotionally, doing chores even his *Appu* would have abhorred – all in pursuit of elusive dollars and for the sake of 'educating his sons and daughters'; when working and associating with dregs in society your kids also get exposed to all that's minus with such appallingly horrendous environments; many stories emerge how some of these kids drop out of college; get on to drugs and mischief – hardly the great plans hatched by their doting planter-father who sold literally everything he owned in Sri Lanka to set up a new life in Australia, UK, Canada etc. What an absolute tragedy! These are true stories related first hand by some ex-planters, pining for the good life they enjoyed and threw away for the pot of Gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow! Yet, history continues to repeat itself!

Today's planter instead of fritting away his precious time drinking and idle gossip should use his leisure time for active physical sports and self-help books on a plethora of topics available to upgrade his Leadership skills, speaking and writing ability, agricultural chemistry, Human Resource Development and Management; accounting skills, IT knowledge etc. Yes, there's so much to study and learn and re-learn!

My advice to you planters: You have a job that most sane people will envy. Be aligned with nature and appreciate it. Count all the blessings you have and the myriad resources you administer; change the paradigm; don't wallow in self-pity and negativism; start opening your eyes, look around for those untapped resources, see how you could add value; seek new markets.; work out the ROI and go for it if feasible! Be an ideas man, yet be practical; not just a dreamer! Create an insatiable thirst for knowledge; start reading quality books. Yes, that's a hobby that's hard to beat! And, if you don't know Tamil or need to brush up your English, do so pronto! In short be focused on what needs/could be done and MOVE!

Henry Mintzberg wrote in *Business Week* that too many leaders don't see themselves as managers. They believe that their job is "to do the right things," while others are responsible for "doing things right." That may be impressive in a consultant's PowerPoint presentation or academic white paper! Yet fundamentally, the best leaders are, first and foremost, managers. Like a good planter, they make things happen. They get results. They organize people; allocate resources, implement strategies – yes, whatever it takes to get things done. And that's key! I wish to share some management concepts.

Let me quote Brian Tracy from his best seller: 'How the Best Leaders Lead'. Tracy talks of the Seven Roles of the Manager: In any enterprise there are seven key roles of the manager. Each of them is only learned through trial and error and continuous practice. But they are all **learnable**, and he says, 'they must be learned for you to realize your full potential as a leader'.

Brian Tracy continues: One of the most important management qualities is **flexibility**. The more different mental tools and skills you have to get the most and the best out of your people, the more flexible and therefore, the more effective you can be as a manager. So what are the seven roles of a manager?

They are **[1] Planning, [2] Organizing, [3] Staffing, [4] Delegation, [5] Supervising, [6] Measuring, [7] Reporting**. Fundamental stuff, really! Think about it: effective planters have been doing so for eons without a leadership guru telling us these basics! Yet today they have dissected and analyzed 'Management' to its finer elements. And we need to look at this science with an open mind.

## 1. PLANNING

Planning is the process of determining exactly what is to be done. Action without planning is the cause of every failure. Action preceded by thorough planning is usually the reason for every success. Find the time to be alone. As soon as you get a spark of an idea, write it down! 'Think on paper' – write down every detail of the goal or objective and every step you will have to take to achieve it. Get the facts, especially the financial facts. Refuse to rely on guesswork or the hope that everything will turn out all right. That's courting disaster! Be even mentally prepared to abandon the plan and try something else if required. But once all aspects are sorted out, start visualizing 'successful completion' – that's when your right brain kicks in – then you can do it! Just as there's an 80/20 rule, there is also a 10/90 rule that says: "The first 10% of the time you spend in planning often accounts for 90% of your success when you put your plan into action."

In business strategy, the purpose is to increase return on investments [ROI] and in totality, on equity, or ROE. The goal of the company or indeed plantation is to earn the very most possible on the amount of money invested in the business. On the other hand, in setting personal strategy, your goal is to increase "return on energy," the amount of mental, emotional, and physical energy that you invested to get results. Think about it – because you save 10 minutes in execution for every minute you invest in planning, you achieve an ROE of 1,000 percent by thinking through every critical detail [Left Brain thinking] and then visualizing success [Right Brain Thinking] to make it happen. This is not some mumbo jumbo, guys – it does make sense!

This may be a cliché now, but worth repeating the **Six P Formula**:

***Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance.***

## 2. ORGANIZING

Organizing is the process of assembling the people and resources you will need to fulfill the plan and achieve your goals. This is a key skill of leadership. People with good organizational skills are invaluable to any organization or Regional Plantation Co.! Nothing is possible without them!

In its simplest form, organization requires that you make a list of everything you will need to carry out the plan on schedule and on budget. These ingredients include money, people, offices, equipment and technology. To ensure that you do not forget something essential, your list should be completed thoroughly before you take any action.

***"For want of a nail, a horse was lost. For want of a horse, a rider was lost. For want of a rider, the battle was lost. From the loss of the battle, an empire was lost. Oh! What a loss for one small nail!"*** An oft repeated English Proverb

Organize your list of requirements by sequence – what you need to do before you do something else, and by priority – what is more important and what is less important. Start on the most vital

elements of your plan first. Practice the 20/80 Rule of Organization. It's a truism that the first 20% of time spent planning is as valuable or more valuable, than the remaining 80% of tasks.

### 3. STAFFING

You must attract and keep the people you need to carry out the plan and achieve the desired results. Your ability to hire the right people will account for as much as 95% of your ultimate success. Most of your frustrations and failures will be the result of having the wrong persons in a key position. **Leadership of RPCs: this gem of Management applies to you too.** Period!

### 4. DELEGATION

Delegation, simply defined is the skill of assigning the right job to the right person in the right way. You always have two choices: You can either do the job yourself, or you can get someone else to do it. Proper delegation is how to make sure that someone else does the job to an acceptable level of quality.

Your ability to delegate effectively is the key to leveraging yourself and multiplying your value to your company or estate. Delegation allows you to move from what you can do personally to what you can manage. Indeed delegation is one of the most important management skills. Without the ability to delegate effectively and well, it is impossible for you to advance in management to higher positions of responsibility. Today's businesses depend on the 'Speed of Trust' and effective delegation is integral.

Delegation is not only about maximizing your own productivity and value; it is also about maximizing the productivity of your staff. Your job as a manager is to get the highest return on the company's investment in people. According to global research findings the average person today is working at 50% of capacity. With effective delegation, you tap into that unused 50-percent potential to increase your staff's productivity. After all, your job as a manager is also to develop people. Delegation is the means that you use to bring out the very best in the people that you have.

The first step in delegation is to think through the job. Decide exactly what is to be done. What results do you/they want? The second step in delegation is to set performance standards. How will you measure to determine whether the job has been done properly or not? The third step is to determine a schedule and a deadline for getting the job done, conforming to the overall quality set.

#### **The Art of Delegation**

**There are seven essentials for effective delegation:**

1. Pick the right person. Picking the wrong person for a key task is a major reason for failure.
2. Match requirements of the job to the abilities of the person. Be sure that the delegatee is capable of doing the job. This factor is obvious but is often overlooked!
3. Delegate effectively to the right person. This frees you to do more things of higher value.
4. Delegate smaller tasks to newer staff to build their confidence and competence.

5. Once all factors are considered, delegate the entire job. One hundred percent responsibility for a task is a major performance motivator. The more often you assign responsibilities to the right people, the more competent they become.
6. Delegate clear outcomes. Make them measurable. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it. Explain especially to you sub-staff, *kanganies* etc what is to be done, how you think it should be done and the reasons for doing this job in the first place. They are not morons after all!
7. Delegate with participation and discussion, for instance after picking a 'Quality Circle' from your factory staff and workers. When workers, now called 'Associates' seem wanted and recognized, they respond in ways unimaginable. I have done so throughout my planting career and that half accounts for YPH records, lowest COPs and Top Prices consistently whilst attending to New & Re-Planting, infilling, establishing commercial nurseries, absolute weed-free conditions with leaf litter working as a inhibitor of weed germination; estate roads and paths in perfect condition, wonderful worker/staff-management engagement & harmony! Sounds Utopian? Well I did it! Remember: delegate in such a way that people walk away feeling -"This is my job; I own it."

Practice **management by exception** when you delegate. Set clear goals, standards and deadlines for the delegated task/s. A job without a deadline is merely a discussion. Delegation is the key to growing your people. When you become effective at delegating with a few staff members, you will soon be given more people to delegate to, plus greater responsibilities, as a result of your delegating skills. All excellent managers are excellent delegators. In old-school thinking, people used to say that, "If you want the job done right, you have to do it yourself." However in new-school thinking the correct statement is, "if you want the job done right, you have to delegate it properly to others so that they can do it to the proper, cost-effective, quality standard."

## 5. SUPERVISING

Whether you are a PD or SD those plantations displaying excellent plucking and/or tapping standards mean that your management is A1. And such results are not accidental. They revolve around intelligent planning and smart supervising. I remember, even as a senior manager on say, Diyagama West, if I had half an hour of relatively free day time I would gleefully hop on to my personal Honda XLR 250CC and 'do a quick run' to the highest point of a plucking field and walk through a plucking field, supervising plucking. After all plucking cost was/is the costliest item on a tea plantation. It is critical that you devote some time to plucking. Perfect standards AND well managed plucking costs means: half the battle won!

Supervising is the process of making sure the job is done on time and on budget. However, delegation is *NOT* abdication! You are still accountable for results. The job of a manager is to get things done effectively though *others*. Your ability to organize the work and to supervise your workers, staff effectively to get the job done on schedule and on budget is the key to getting the results for which you are responsible. Your ability to supervise others can be greatly improved by learning what other excellent, well proven managers of estates have discovered and done over the years and by applying these principles and ideas to your interactions with your subordinates.

For example when I was an Assistant Superintendent on Brunswick Group Maskeliya way back in the early '70s I used to rummage through the archives with help from an accommodating Chief Clerk and pore over old files, noting down key points in circulars issued by a former Superintendent of Brunswick Estate Mr. Perkins who had an eye for detail! So be humble – learn from others and give credit to them as gratitude. Sometimes you don't have to reinvent the wheel! Pick up from others and progress – up!

### **Five Keys to Excellent Supervision**

1. Accept complete responsibility for your staff. You choose them, you assign them, and you manage them.
2. Look upon your staff with the same patience and understanding as you would look upon younger members of your family.
3. Practice the '**Friendship Factor**' with them, which consists of three components: **time**, **caring**, and **respect**. Give staff time when they want to talk to you. Express caring and concern for them and their problems. Treat them with respect – even your **Thalaivars** – the same way you would treat a customer or friend. This aspect should be part of your estate managerial DNA!
4. Practice Servant Leadership, by seeing your job a position of trust with your subordinates. Just as they are there to serve you and the company/plantation, you are there to serve them, as well
5. Practice Golden Rule Management. Treat each person the way you would like to be treated if the situation were reversed. When you practice Golden Rule Management – you manage other people the way you like to be managed – you will then elicit higher performance from your people than in any other way. Try it. Practice it. It worked/works for me always!

### **The Best Managers**

According to numerous surveys of employees in the 'work world', the best bosses and supervisors possess three critical qualities:

1. **Structure**. Everyone knows exactly what needs to be done, why it is to be done, and to what standard.
2. **Consideration**. The boss makes employees feel that he or she really cares for them.
3. **Freedom**. Good bosses give their people freedom to perform. Once they are assigned a task, they try to stay out of the way, except to comment and to help when needed.

### **Back to School**

One of your jobs as the leader or **Peria Dorai** of a plantation is to be a teacher. The reason you are in charge is because of your superior level of knowledge and skill [presumably!] One of the most helpful things you can do is to pass on your knowledge and skill to those who report to you.

Teach other people how to do the job that you have already mastered. You multiply your output by teaching someone else how to do something that only you can do. And you, along the way, increase their value to the business and to your plantation and by extension to your RPC!

## 6. MEASURING

Measuring requires setting metrics – measures and numbers – for each part of the work, including setting standards of performance for each job. Every business activity and that includes your plantation and even a Division and/or Factory can be expressed and defined in numbers of some kind, typically financial numbers. In Jim Collin's famous book ***Good to Great***, he emphasizes the importance of the economic denominator in any business. This is sometimes referred to as the **Critical Success Factor** [CSF] the measure of which is the best indicator of the health of the business, or some part of the business.

In sales, the measure can be the number of calls, or the number of face-to-face appointments. If it is the leadership of the company, the critical measure can be quarterly sales, profitability, or the share price. In business, the ultimate number is usually the ***net cash flow***, the actual amount of free cash that is available – after all charges – to pay out as profits and dividends.

You must establish numbers for yourself in each key area. These become your targets and measures how well you are doing. Significantly, you must select one number that is more indicative of your success than any other and focus on that number, literally, every day – guaranteeing success!

All rewards, recognition, promotion and bonuses in your set-up should be tied to performance, to achieving the numbers and measures you have set.

## 7. REPORTING

You must keep the key people inside and outside of your business / plantation informed at all times. This is one of the most important responsibilities of leadership – and of people at every level of the organization. Perhaps 95% or more of problems in a company can be traced back to poor or nonexistent communications. People were not informed of events or given information that was essential to their ability to do their jobs correctly. When in doubt, more information is better than less information!

Make a list of everyone who needs to know what you are doing and how well you are doing it. Sometimes you need to blow your own trumpet as no one else will do so! Start with your boss. What information does your boss need from you on a regular basis? Go and ask. Write it down. Report back regularly. What about bad news? Be sure you tell it first! If someone else conveys the negative information, it can easily get distorted and reflect badly on you before you even get a chance to comment! Practice a “no surprises” strategy.

Knowing how to report to your boss is a key skill of ‘managing up’. Leadership is not only about ‘managing down’ – managing your employees and subordinates – it is also about managing your boss! Give those you report to honest and complete information and speak with candor. Don't be afraid to suggest initiatives and to campaign hard for what you believe. To get things done, you not only need your employees buy in to your goals; you need your boss to buy in as well!

Finally, to fulfill your potential, you must become excellent at what you do. Resolve to be the best, to join the 10 percent in your field. Set your standards high. Look around you at the best people in your field: think about how you could be as good as or better at your job than they are.

The key to moving from good to great in your field is to ask yourself the brutal question: ***“Why aren’t I already the best at what I do?”*** The answer is always the same. The reason you are not at the top of your business / field is because you have not yet decided to be there or you have not backed that decision up with the hard, hard work on yourself that IS necessary!

***So is ‘Planting’ the Best Job in the World?***

It certainly is provided you **work hard** and **smart**; stay **focused, up dated** and **relevant**!

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