



THE WHISPERING HALLS

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Abstract :

Workplaces bring together individuals with diverse roles, expectations, and perspectives, often leading to conflict and dissatisfaction. While such challenges are inherent to human interaction, their roots frequently lie in misaligned expectations, comparison, and miscommunication. Drawing upon the timeless wisdom of Sanskrit subhāṣitas, this essay explores the enduring nature of human behavior and its relevance to modern organizational dynamics. Through a blend of classical insights and personal experience, it highlights the causes of workplace discontent and suggests reflective approaches to managing conflict with clarity and balance.

Keywords #Workplace dynamics; #Subhāṣitas; #Conflict management #Human behavior; #Organizational culture; #Self-reflection;

Introduction

A workplace brings together individuals of diverse backgrounds, qualifications, aspirations, and temperaments, all striving toward a shared organizational goal. If conflicts can arise even within close-knit families, it is only natural that interactions among colleagues - whether managers, peers, or subordinates - present their own set of challenges. Such interactions often give rise to cognitive dissonance and other discordant emotions which, if left unaddressed, may gradually foster a toxic work environment.

In his book 'Same as Ever', Morgan Housel attributes Warren Buffett's enduring success

in financial markets to his deep understanding of the unchanging nature of human behavior. While the world evolves through natural calamities, wars, and disruptive innovations, fundamental human emotions and behavioral patterns remain largely constant.

It is within this context that the wisdom of ancient Sanskrit literature offers valuable insights into modern workplace dynamics. This essay seeks to explore how subhāṣitas, concise yet profound sayings, can serve as guiding principles for navigating workplace stress and interpersonal challenges. Drawing upon both classical wisdom and personal

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experience, it attempts to illuminate the causes of workplace discontent and suggest thoughtful approaches to addressing them.

Disagreements cannot be avoided

मतिभेदतमस्तिरोहिते गहने कृत्यविधौ विवेकिनाम्।

सुकृतः परिशुद्ध आगमः कुरुते दीप इवार्थदर्शनम्॥¹

matibhedatamastirohite gahane kṛtyavidhau
vivekinām।

sukṛtaḥ pariśuddha āgamaḥ kurute dīpa
ivārthadarśanam।।

"When the darkness of disagreement obscures and complicates the course of action, science carefully studied and comprehended helps persons of discrimination (vivekinām) get to the right solution, similar to a bright light, well placed and burning steadily illumines objects in the dark."

Disagreement is inevitable in any setting, especially in the workplace. When not handled well, it can create cognitive dissonance and spill over into informal complaints and "water-cooler" conversations, gradually fostering a toxic environment. As the proverb warns, one bad apple can spoil the whole lot.

The above verse from the poet Bharavi's Kiratarjuniyam offers a timeless way to navigate such situations - one that remains relevant even today. In the absence of consensus, it is wise to step back, re-examine the issue, and search for a more considered solution. And when agreement still proves elusive, it is prudent to agree to disagree, accept the outcome, and move forward with the work at hand rather than holding on to a

sense of self-righteousness. As they say, attack the problem and not the person.

Intertwined Conflicts

पलाशकुसुमभ्रान्त्या शुकतुण्डे पतत्यलिः।

सोऽपि जम्बूफलभ्रान्त्या तमलिं धर्तुमिच्छति॥

palāśakusumabhrāntyā śukatūṇḍe patatyaliḥ.

so'pijambūphalabhrāntyātamaliṁdhartumicchati.

"A bee mistakes the parrot's beak for a palāśa flower and seeks to sip its nectar, while the parrot mistakes the bee for a jambu fruit and attempts to devour it."

This evocative subhāṣita beautifully captures the dynamics between a supervisor and an individual contributor, offering a subtle yet insightful glimpse into the conflicts that often arise between managers and their teams. Misperception lies at the heart of such interactions - each party interpreting the other through their own expectations and assumptions. Consequently, it is not uncommon to hear individuals lament that their managers are unfair or that their contributions go unrecognized, while managers, in turn, may feel that their efforts to guide and evaluate are misunderstood.

One must remember that every individual within an organization carries responsibilities to fulfill, with the scope and complexity of these responsibilities varying according to role. While an individual contributor is primarily concerned with executing assigned tasks, a manager is entrusted with the broader responsibility of coordinating efforts and delivering outcomes through a team. This fundamental difference in roles often

1 Kirātārjunīyam 2.33, Bhāravī

becomes a source of misunderstanding if not consciously acknowledged.

In my own professional journey, one practice that proved particularly effective was the clear documentation of expectations and outcomes, coupled with regular communication with my manager. This approach, widely followed within the organization, enabled early course correction and minimized the scope for misinterpretation. When expectations are articulated and revisited periodically, ambiguity diminishes, and alignment becomes easier to sustain.

Another important means of reducing friction lies in making employees feel relevant and valued. When individuals understand how their work contributes to the larger mission and vision of the organization, their sense of purpose is strengthened. Too often, employees become so absorbed in immediate tasks that they lose sight of the broader context. Regularly reinforcing the significance of their contributions helps reduce the need for external validation and fosters intrinsic motivation.

Conflicts may arise from differences in perspective, competition for limited resources, or a host of other factors. However, one of the most common and subtle sources of workplace conflict is a mismatch in expectations - between what employees believe is required of them and what managers actually anticipate. Such gaps, if left unaddressed, can quietly erode trust and productivity.

While clear communication and systematic documentation can effectively manage these challenges, they require a willingness to

confront uncomfortable realities. At times, individuals may hesitate to acknowledge the proverbial elephant in the room. In such situations, unspoken concerns tend to manifest as informal complaints and whispered conversations, often at the proverbial water cooler, thereby exacerbating rather than resolving the underlying issues.

The Whispering Halls

परपरिवादः परिषदि न कथञ्चन पण्डितेन कर्तव्यः।
सत्यमपि तन्न वाच्यं यदुक्तमसुखावहं भवति॥४॥

paraparivādaḥ pariṣadi na kathamcana paṇḍitena
kartavyaḥ।

satyamapi tanna vācyaṃ yaduktamasukhāvahaṃ
bhavati॥(nītidviṣaṣṭikā)

Life is seldom fair, and the experience of grievances is both natural and inevitable. At times, these grievances are merely perceived; at others, they stem from genuine issues that remain unaddressed. Regardless of their nature, one must exercise discernment in choosing what to share within the workplace. Words, once spoken, have a way of returning - often in unexpected ways. The colleague to whom one confides today may well occupy a position of authority tomorrow.

Moreover, airing grievances in informal workplace settings rarely serves a constructive purpose. Instead of resolving concerns, it often amplifies discontent and fosters an environment of mistrust. Thoughtless expression, even when rooted in truth, may harm relationships and reputations alike.

Among perceived grievances, one of the most common sources of disquiet is the feeling that others are receiving a better deal -

be it recognition, opportunity, or reward. Such comparisons can quietly breed resentment, even when the full context remains unseen. Unless tempered with reflection and perspective, these sentiments may cloud judgment and further deepen workplace discord.

Why is other's pie bigger than mine?

अधो अधः पश्यतः कस्य महिमा न उपचीयते।

उपरि उपरि पश्यन्तः सर्व एव दरिद्रति ॥

adho adhaḥ paśyataḥ kasya mahimā na upacīyate |
upari upari paśyantaḥ sarva eva dāridrati ||

“One who looks at those less fortunate than oneself finds one's sense of worth enhanced; but one who constantly compares oneself with the more fortunate will always feel impoverished.”

The tendency to feel unsettled by the belief that someone else has received a better deal is far more common than one might admit. Such comparisons form a quiet yet persistent source of stress and dissatisfaction. This is not to suggest that ambition should be abandoned - aspiration and growth are essential to both personal and professional development. The difficulty arises when one's sense of self-worth becomes tethered to the perceived progress of others. Comparisons of this kind seldom bring clarity or fulfilment; instead, they foster restlessness and discontent.

It is worth remembering that life is not a zero-sum game. The success of one does not necessitate the diminishment of another. Opportunities are neither so scarce nor so rigidly distributed as they may appear in

moments of comparison-driven anxiety.

An incident from my professional life illustrates this tendency vividly. A few years ago, a former colleague shared something that amused me. It was a practice to publish the names of the promoted people on the bulletin board. When he saw his name was missing in the list but mine was there, he immediately walked down to a nearby company and applied for a position there. However, the very next day, he found he was also promoted, he withdrew his application from the neighbouring company. What struck me most was that our professional paths had scarcely intersected - we worked in different teams, with no real basis for comparison. Until then, I had not fully appreciated how closely individuals observe and measure themselves against the milestones of others.

I consider myself fortunate to have largely avoided this trap. Rather than tracking the progress of peers, I chose to focus on taking up challenging assignments, trusting that growth would follow sustained effort. In due course, it did.

In many ways, professional journeys resemble the principles of probability: over time, outcomes tend to stabilize, and trajectories align with consistent choices and efforts. Long-term progress is shaped less by where others stand and more by how one responds to opportunities and challenges.

In the present age of social media, the impulse to compare is further intensified, often driven by selective and misleading portrayals of success. In such a context, the wisdom of the *subhāṣita* becomes especially relevant. A

more balanced and fulfilling approach lies in cultivating gratitude - by reflecting on those less fortunate - rather than allowing oneself to be consumed by envy.

The Blame Game

परनिन्दासु पाण्डित्यं स्वेषु कार्येष्वनुद्यमः।

प्रद्वेषश्च गुणज्ञेषु पन्थानो ह्यापदां त्रयः॥

paranindāsu pāṇḍityaṃ sveṣu kāryeṣvanudyamaḥ |
pradveṣaśca guṇajñeṣu panthāno hyāpadāṃ
trayaḥ ||

“Displaying cleverness in blaming others, indolence in performing one’s own duties, and envy toward the virtuous - these are the three paths that lead to downfall.”

Another common cause of conflicts is the blame game and not taking responsibility for one’s own mistakes. It is far easier to assign blame than to engage in honest self-reflection. In moments of failure or disappointment, attributing fault to others can provide temporary comfort, but it seldom addresses the underlying cause. Many of the whispered complaints and quiet resentments that circulate in workplaces arise from deeper feelings of insecurity and a lack of self-confidence.

Before casting blame, it is therefore worthwhile to pause and examine one’s own emotional response. What precisely has caused the sense of discomfort or dissatisfaction? Is it a genuine injustice, or does it stem from unmet expectations, comparison, or self-doubt? Such introspection, though demanding, is essential for clarity and growth.

By understanding the roots of one’s own reactions, one can move away from a cycle of blame and toward a more constructive engagement with challenges. In doing so, the individual not only avoids the pitfalls described in the *subhāṣita* but also cultivates resilience and maturity in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

It is only natural for individuals to vent their anger, frustrations, and dissatisfaction - whether with colleagues at the workplace or with family at home. Yet, such expressions, if not tempered with discretion, can give rise to uncomfortable and sometimes unintended consequences in both spheres.

It would be unrealistic to expect a utopian workplace devoid of conflict. Classical *darśanas* such as *Sāṅkhya* and *Bauddha* philosophy remind us that dissatisfaction and suffering are intrinsic to human experience. The intent of this essay, therefore, is not to eliminate conflict altogether, but to offer guidance through the wisdom of *subhāṣitas* - shedding light on the underlying causes of employee discontent and suggesting thoughtful ways to address them.

These *subhāṣitas* serve as mirrors, encouraging introspection and discernment. They help us distinguish between real and perceived conflicts, and in doing so, enable us to respond with greater clarity, balance, and maturity. Ultimately, the resolution of conflict lies not merely in changing external circumstances, but in refining one’s own understanding and perspective.

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'Friends are angels who lift us to our feet when our wings have trouble remembering how to fly.'

**There is no beginning or end...
Yesterday is history.
Tomorrow is a mystery.
Today is a gift.**