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That sweet obsession

Subir Chowdhury is here with his latest book, "The Ice Cream Maker".
ZIYA US SALAM speaks to the man whose chief passion is quality

It is a whisper that might just turn into a scream. Barely had we put "Who Moved My Cheese" in the inner recesses of our memory that we were told another best seller in the world of management, in the sphere of quality promotion, in the realms of positive thinking, is upon us. And if we don't take heed of it, it might just melt off the shelves faster than we think! The reference is to "The Ice Cream Maker", a simple story of an ice cream manufacturer whose product does not find a shelf in an upmarket store. This racy read by Subir Chowdhury comes in 115 pages.

Subir Chowdhury. Does the name ring a bell?

Well, sure enough. He talked of 'The Six Signs of the Sigma' not long ago. Now, he wants to instil a belief in quality, and wants India and Indians to shape up before the world asks us to ship out. So, how did "The Ice Cream Maker" come about? Was the balding, smiling man with a typical management orator's tie and jacket consciously searching for a management bestseller?

Everyone's business

"My previous book 'The Power of Six Sigma' is the number one selling book globally, sold more than a million copies and translated into more than 20 languages. However, what I found is that Six Sigma still belongs to five-ten per cent of employees within an organisation. However, quality is everyone's business - all the people, all the time. The reason Toyota is still the benchmark for quality is, most employees from top to bottom always worry about quality, always practice quality. Unfortunately, there is not a single book that explains quality in a level that is understandable to everyone - from CEO to an assembly line worker to a telephone operator. So, I thought I would write a book that explains it to everyone. Even an eighth grader reads it and understands what quality is all about. This vacuum gave birth to 'The Ice Cream Maker' (brought here by Random House)."

No conscious decision

However, he claims, he did not consciously go in search of a bestseller, his obsession with quality notwithstanding. "No, absolutely not! How can I consciously search for a management bestseller? Any author's prime objective is to make the customer ('reader' in this case) happy. During manuscript development process, I tested the book's early manuscript with 100 different types of readers (unknown to me personally). Once the data suggested that everyone liked the book and wanted to share the book with other people, I was happy to let the manuscript go for publication."



However, in times of mediocrity, cannot there be business without quality? Also, can there be business without a human touch?

"No, I do not believe any business can survive without quality. Even the most innovative companies will suffer dearly if they do not embrace quality. In services, good human touch is very critical. More often, managers do mistake not to emphasise enough about human touch. Organisations that do not embrace internal customers (employees, staff) can never be successful keeping happy external customers (persons that buy products or take services)."

Relevance to India

Fine, but how relevant is *The Ice Cream Maker* in India where economic restructuring is said to be a sell-out to foreign interest?

"At this current time, '*The Ice Cream Maker*' is most relevant to India. India already has 'cost' advantage over Western countries. India must not become like China (because) most of the Chinese companies do not have global brand names like Hyundai, LG, Samsung of Korea. India must concentrate on producing global brands, only then its products will be embraced by global customers. The reason Infosys or TCS is becoming successful globally is due to delivering quality products and services with cheaper 'price' than global competition. India must demonstrate similar trend in manufacturing."

Technology savvy, Subir, a widely travelled man with his own site, claims, "'*The Ice Cream Maker*' is the first step for Indian companies to educate (the) mass work force to become quality centric, to teach them the power of quality. This book should be translated into local languages and Hindi, so that most workers can read and understand."

Nation of talent

He talks of return to talent. However, in a country like India, there are plenty of skilled workers living in acute poverty. How does one explain that anomaly?

"India is a nation of 'talents'. The reason India has become a global brand is due to its talented and skilled work force. But, India, as a country, must embrace quality, how to improve the people quality, infrastructure quality! I really doubt how many politicians in India understand quality?"

However, "*The Ice Cream Maker*" takes a studious, look-in approach at tackling challenges. Does it have a subtle message for all those local organisations in the Third World who lose out to global competition?

Says the man whose one mantra is quality, "*The Ice Cream Maker*'s main intent is to make any organisation successful by embracing quality, by educating its workforce on it. Irrespective of a developing country's local organisation or a Fortune 100 company - virtually all need quality to be competitive for a longer period."

So, put your best foot forward and embrace life. Best, did one say? Subir has the last word: "The real measure of performance is not how you do at your best, but how you do at your worst."