The Science in Motivation

Sadhna Dash

School of Human Resource Management, Xavier University, Bhubaneswar
Email: sadhna[at]xub[dot]edu[dot]in

Abstract

Motivation has been a much-researched area in behavioral sciences. As humans engage in creating meaningful lives through their careers, they experience growth professionally and personally and emerge contented. This case on motivation explores an episode in the life of Raghu, a talented software developer. A key talent at AGSL, a mid-sized software product development company in the pharma industry. Raghu, a senior software developer, was among the top performers in the organization. Having worked in the organization for over 8 years Raghu was valued as a key resource as much by the clients as by his manager Vijay. The case revolves around the question as to what happens when motivational levels are low and career aspirations collide head-on with organizational priorities. What does Raghu put at stake when pursuing a career where career aspirations remained unmet?

Key words: *motivation, career aspiration*, *market growth, expansion, fastener industry, automotive industry*

The Context:

Vijay was worried. Of late he sensed something not quite right with Raghu's attitude. Raghu was a key talent in Vijay's team. Vijay could not exactly put his finger on what was happening but something was wrong. He had the feeling that Raghu was avoiding him, which was rather unusual as Raghu often sought him out to discuss one work issue or the other. Raghu was often not available at his desk, when Vijay went looking for him. The work log reports showed evidence that the tasks assigned to Raghu were completed and completed well within the deadline. This was not surprising as Raghu was consistently a top performer in the team for the past 6 years. Raghu was a critical resource of the company who handled its largest client in the USA. The clients were very happy with Raghu's performance and had, over the past few years, insisted that Raghu work on their project.

The client had direct access to Raghu and could reach him for any work exigency any time of the day. Vijay often saw Raghu busy at his workstation. However recently, on a few occasions when Vijay needed to check something with him, Raghu was nowhere to be found. This usually happened towards the end of the workday.

Vijay was the Project Head for PSP and was one of AGSL veterans who had been with the company since its inception. He was responsible for managing some of AGSL's oldest and toughest clients. He managed a team of over 500 employees with 18 team leaders reporting to him directly. Not wanting to involve Raghu's team leader at this stage, as he was already tied up with stringent project delivery deadlines, Vijay called Sampath the HRBP (HR Business Partner) assigned to his teams and shared his concerns. Vijay felt that ever since Raghu was denied the opportunity to move to the new role, that he had applied for internally, he was acting weird.

All employees had access to the employee job portal where internal job opportunities were posted providing an opportunity for exploring other assignments within the company. Raghu had applied for one of the jobs posted and was also selected. However, since he was indispensable for the ongoing project he was pursued to stay back. After discussing Vijay's concerns, Sampath and Vijay decided to meet with the Head of HR, Revathi Khanna, and take her advice on the matter.

Unravelling the Secret Behind Raghu's Absence:

AGSL had recently moved from the manual attendance punch card system and had implemented an electronic card access control system. This was part of the company's new quality accreditation process. It was a mandated security protocol and was also being used for computing attendance and leave management activities. The Head HR alone was authorized to access the access control software.

Vijay started the meeting by admitting that he was not sure what he was worried about but felt a nagging sense of something not being right about Raghu's conduct and availability during stipulated office hours. He requested a confidential report on Raghu from the electronic access control card reading system so he could check the attendance and availability of Raghu in the office during designated work hours. Revathi readily agreed since Vijay was responsible for one of the biggest and the oldest clients of the organization, and his concern appeared genuine. She quickly assigned a team member to extract the data from the access control software for Raghu for the dates shared by Vijay. Later that day Revathi received the report. On the face of it, everything looked fine. Raghu would swipe in between 10:00 and 10:30 AM in the mornings and swipe out between 6 and 7:00 PM in the evenings. She shared the report with Vijay. They briefly discussed the report and felt that Vijay's concerns may be misplaced, and everything was fine.

Yet Vijay felt something was amiss. He would need to be more specific concerning what was exactly going on. A few days later Vijay was back to meet Revathi. This time he was very clear that Raghu was not in the office during a specific meeting that suddenly came up with the client at 4.45 PM, on the previous day. This meeting was requested by the client at very short notice to address a sudden technical issue that the client was facing. Raghu was nowhere to be found. The team members had checked the restrooms, the cafeteria, and the smoking gallery, but Raghu was not anywhere around. Once again Revathi asked her team member to extract data from the electronic access control software for the specific date and time that Vijay had provided her.

The access control data for Raghu on that particular day is given in **Exhibit 1** According to the access-card data, Raghu was very much in the office from 9:40 AM till 6:30 PM that day, while Vijay was very sure that Raghu was not in the office during this period. Revathi then decided to review the CCTV camera recordings that were surveying the access control points at the entry and exit doors on the company premises. What they discovered was both shocking and depressing. **Exhibit 2** provides the observations from the CCTV recording for the day 1st of Feb 2018.

The CCTV footage of the access control points for a period of 15 days was then retrieved to ascertain patterns of the access card usage by Raghu. Another younger and relatively new team member Anil's access card too was retrieved based on the findings from the CCTV footage (**see Exhibit 3**). On a few days during the week, Raghu's access control card was used by Anil, his team member. It was Anil who would swipe in as Raghu first time every morning between 9.45-AM and 10.15 AM and again in the evening for the last time between 6.30 PM and 7 PM. Raghu would arrive much later in the day, and Anil would come to the reception and swipe Raghu's card for him and both would go to their respective workstations. Similarly, both Raghu and Anil would together exit around 4-4.30PM on most days. A short while later, Anil was seen swiping both his access card as well as Raghu's access card and coming back into the office. Anil would finally leave the office around 7-7.30PM swiping out both his card as well as Raghu's card.

Raghu as a Top Performer:

After joining AGSL in 2008 Raghu had slowly become a key resource for the organization. In addition to being technically thorough, he was well-informed on industry insights and had gained significant knowledge about AGSL's largest client. Six years ago, the client had started a new service for their customers and had specifically requested Raghu to be made the technical lead for this project. Vijay was only too happy, as he knew that he could rely on Raghu to almost manage the new project work independently for the client. Raghu was not just good at his job as a software coder and a subject matter expert in his area, but he also had a deep understanding of the client's business and the regulatory requirements for the pharma industry in USA. Undoubtedly, he was an asset for AGSL.

Year on year Raghu was the top performer of the team and was often recognized *in cash* and *in-kind* by the client and the company for his outstanding performance. Clients would directly call

Raghu for resolving any issues they face on the product and he would quickly work on it and resolve it speedily. Raghu had become indispensable for the team. As a technical lead, Raghu was among the youngest leads in Vijay's team. AGSL's merit-based performance management system recognized Raghu as one of the top paid team members in Vijay's team. During the review last April Raghu had earned a 16% hike, the maximum anyone had got in the organization so far. The plan was to promote Raghu as team lead for the project in April this year.

The Inflection Point for Raghu at AGSL:

Six months ago, AGSL had acquired a new client and had done an internal job posting for a team leader for this new client. As per the company policy, an employee who had worked in AGSL for more than five years, and he/she fulfilled the other technical criteria for the job could apply for the position. Raghu applied for the job using the HR portal. Vijay was not too happy about it, however as per the HR policy he could not stop Raghu from applying for the post. Raghu qualified to attend the interview. Given his previous appraisals in the organization, he was selected by the panel as the most suitable candidate for the job. Vijay took up the matter with the COO (Chief Operation Officer) and the head of HR. In the best interest of organizational priorities towards its largest and oldest customer, Raghu was counseled in the presence of HR by Vijay, to remain in his current team with current responsibilities. In a separate meeting with the COO Raghu was reminded that he was a critical resource for the customer and was also assured that in the upcoming review cycle in April (next couple of months) he would be promoted as team lead for the on-going project.

Ethical Code of Conduct:

What was happening was clearly a gross violation of AGSL's code of conduct and ethical behavior policy. There was no doubt that appropriate action as per the HR policy had to be initiated and the entire matter had to be dealt with swiftly and in complete confidentiality. The Head HR

along with Vijay met with the COO and all details of the case were shared. There were no doubts in anyone's mind that both Raghu and Anil were to be terminated, though the absence of Raghu would result in severe business implications for AGSL's largest client. Breach of ethical code of conduct case was prepared by Revathi. The access card data as well as the CCTV footages were provided as evidences. No prior intimation was provided to Raghu nor Anil about this discussion. As soon as Raghu reported to work the next morning Sampath sought him out stating that he needs to meet with the Head HR for a discussion.

The Epilogue:

The moment Raghu walked into the room it was evident that this was something serious. Both his manager and the Head HR were seated in the room, with some documents stacked on the table in front of them, and they looked expressionless. Raghu flashed a lazy half-smile, it had already dawned on him that it was finally the day of reckoning, something he had visualized as inevitable ever since he and Anil had struck a deal a few months back. Work had gotten boring and sitting in the office for 8 hours made absolutely no sense. He knew Anil from his previous company, an average performer still a learner in many ways, and often sought help from Raghu on the codes that he wrote. Raghu had cornered him into agreeing to help him with the coding work in exchange for swiping his access card earlier than he arrived in the office and long after he physically left the office on a few days.

It was difficult for Raghu to look at Vijay or Revathi, instead, he stared at the files on the table and said "So can I submit my resignation or are you going to terminate me? Give me a piece of paper and I'll write the resignation right now and leave." Neither Revathi nor Vijay was surprised by Raghu's response. Raghu was smart and that is what made him an asset. Yet ethics override all other considerations, and they had no option other than to let him go. There was nothing really that needed to be said, yet Vijay could not resist asking him "Why did you do this Raghu"?

Raghu remained silent he knew there was no point in justifying his actions. All along he was aware that what he was doing was a gross breach of the company's code of conduct. Somehow, he felt his actions were justified, after all, they were more worried about the client than about him. Revathi handed him a blank sheet of paper. He scribbled his resignation in one single sentence, signed it, dated it, and pushed it back on the table towards them. He stood up and left the room offering neither an apology nor an explanation. Already he was making a mental note to call his previous manager from the earlier company who had contacted him a few weeks back asking him if he wanted to join a startup. The salary did not sound interesting, it was just a little more than what he currently earned, but he cared less. A start-up sounded interesting right now and he could join them immediately.

Next Sampath looked for Anil and accompanied him to the meeting room. Anil was already visibly nervous and walked into the room hesitantly. Guilt surged to the fore and Anil's drooping shoulders were indicative of his sentiments. He joined his hands in an apology and tears began to build up. "I am sorry I'm really very, very sorry for what I have done. I will never do this again this was the first time please excuse me… I will never do it again. I'm willing to take on any punishment but please don't terminate me," he begged. Revathi requested him to take a seat and to calm down. With tears continuing to run down his cheeks Anil explained how he and Raghu had struck a deal for Raghu to do Anil's work and for Anil to operate Raghu's access card and fake his presence in the office on certain days of the week. Raghu would come in later in the day and on average would work for three to four hours and complete his work as well as Anil's work during this time. Such was Raghu's work expertise. Anil was served his termination letter and asked to provide his resignation letter, as per the company's HR practice.

Accompanied by security staff both Raghu and Anil ware walked to their desks, where they collected their personal belongings and left the office immediately. Sampath informed the security

teams that Raghu and Anil were no longer employees and may not be permitted to enter the company premises without authorized permits.

Later that day Vijay summoned his team leads and briefly share that two of the group members had to be unexpectedly relieved due to HR issues.

As Revathi got ready to leave the office for the day she tilted her chair back and staring up at the ceiling heaved a deep sigh….. *I wish I had not agreed to the plan proposed by the COO and Vijay about withholding Raghu's transfer to the new project.*

They had lost a valued employee in the process and its implications for the client was a problem for another day. In that instant, she made a resolve never to allow business teams to override HR policies even if it implied an adverse impact on the business for a while. There are ways in which business impact can be proactively managed without compromising the individual. They had instead chosen a shortcut, and this was its outcome. In a way, Revathi felt it was a failure on the part of the organization and not the individuals.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1 : *Swipe card data of Raghu on 1st Feb 2018*

Emp ID	Emp Name	Swipe in time		Swipe out time		Out Of Office (duration in mins)	Month	Day	Year
AGS00104	Raghu S	09.40.00	Door no. B1	10.45.18	Door no. B1		2	1	2018
AGS00104	Raghu S	10.48.05	Door no. E2	13.02.33	Door no. E2	03.27	2	1	2018
AGS00104	Raghu S	13.47.34	Door no. E2	16.24.16	Door no. B1	45.01	2	1	2018
AGS00104	Raghu S	16.33.16	Door no. B1	19.30.02	Door no. B1	06.00	2	1	2018

Exhibit 2 : *Access card data and camera shots of Raghu entering and exiting the office on 1st Feb 2018*

Swipe in time	09.40.00	Anil is seen swiping his card at the Basement entry door + Raghu's Card is also swiped 'in' by Anil
Swipe out time	10.45.18	Raghu's Card is swiped by Anil to exit through the Basement entry door+ both enter in together
Swipe in time	10.48.05	Raghu swipes his card and enters through the Main door E2 in the Office Lobby
Swipe out time	13.02.33	Raghu swipes his card and exits through the Main door E2 in the Office Lobby
Swipe in time	13.47.21	Raghu swipes his card and enters through the Main door E2 in the Office Lobby
Swipe out time	16.24.16	Raghu swipes his card and exits at the Basement door
Swipe in time	16.33.11	Raghu's card is swiped by Anil at the Basement door
Swipe out time	18.30.02	Raghu's Card is swiped by Anil to exit at the basement door

Exhibit 3 : *Swipe card data of Anil on 1st Feb 2018*

Emp ID	Emp Name	Swipe in time		Swipe out time		Out Of Office time	Month	Day	Year
AGS01127	Anil K P.	09.39.58	Door no. B1	10.45.19	Door no. B1		2	1	2018
AGS01127	Anil K P.	10.49.02	Door no. B1	16.25.22	Door no. E2	04.23	2	1	2018
AGS01127	Anil K P.	16.33.11	Door no. E2	19.30.02	Door no. B1	8.29	2	1	2018