

Creating creativity

Cavas Gobhai is helping corporations reinvent their future

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What do you call a business consultant whose speciality is to visualize, energize, motivate? In the US he is known as facilitator; in Germany as midwife. Cavas Gobhai thinks of himself as an air traffic controller, enabling the safe landing of many "baby" ideas which might otherwise collide and collapse in midair, in the aggressive atmosphere of a social or business think tank.

Early on Gobhai realized that "there's more to creativity than to give birth to unobvious ideas." As soon as one is born, it is "butchered by well-meaning people." So, if there was to be originality in management, Gobhai "had to ensure that the ground was receptive for the nourishment of seeds of creativity." This perception, says Gobhai, led him to group dynamics: how to create a climate within a group of people that is receptive to ideas.

But there was another hurdle ahead: in the process of implementation people tend to change their minds, says Gobhai. There is a need to ensure commitment to the ideas.

To eliminate the usual confrontational attitudes Gobhai believes that "facts in black and white — a data base — can demystify the organization (and) eliminate shadow boxing." The next step is to develop a consensus on what the organization should be 10 years hence. The forward focus "helps to eliminate individuals and concentrate on functions," as Gobhai has discovered. Thereafter it's easier to backtrack and establish an intermediate goal.

Gobhai believes in distilling "consensus on the essence" by distinguishing between concept and execution. He also warns against falling into the trap of differing assumptions and is most emphatic that consensus should emerge "through



Cavas Gobhai: nurturing ideas

Photo: Noshir Gobhai

creativity, not compromise." This is especially useful in situations with a political bias where normally consensus is the end result of much give and take. But a third position may give both erstwhile adversaries "more than they initially wanted," remarks Gobhai in justification of his techniques.

Apart from corporations like AT&T, the Atomic Energy Commission, Coca-Cola, Disney, DuPont, Heinz, Procter and Gamble, Xerox (the bio data notes more than 100 names of international standing) with whom Gobhai has worked, he was called, in 1990, by the mayors of Berlin. The divided city, then on the verge of reunification, needed a vision. "What will it be like, the core of the new, improved Berlin? Who will dream a dream for it? Will it be a dream or a vision? And who will take that vi-

sion forward? These (were) the questions in the minds of the bipolar mayors. And when such matters preoccupy such people, it is, it seems, the right moment to call Cambridge, Massachusetts in the US and summon a man called Cavas Minocher Gobhai," C. Y. Gopinath enunciates in the "Perspectives" column of the Bombay-based *The Independent* (October 5, 1991).

Gobhai ascribes this assignment to his fortuitous presence in Berlin, the venue of an international rock concert where he was accompanying his only son Dinshaw, a compulsive rock guitarist. There were 200,000 people attending the concert in Berlin. There were also 40 assorted international professionals ranging from developers, architects and city planners to authors and historians who had responded to the mayors' invitation to Berlin, says Gobhai. Among them Gobhai says he helped "start a constructive, creative public dialogue." In return one of the participants dubbed him *hebamme* — midwife!

Gobhai sees himself advising at the intersection of four ways of thought: creative thought, collaborative thought, strategic thought and fact based thought. And his primary concern is to rein in adversarial attitudes and promote collaborative ones.

This characteristic has been even more pronounced in Gobhai's work for the citizens of Arlington, a 45,000 strong community in the neighborhood of Boston. Here an old guard — white, Irish, conservative — is confronted with a new guard comprising Vietnamese, Indian and Jewish intelligentsia who have been or continue to be connected with Boston's great centers of learning like Harvard, MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and the others. There

Gobhai is enabling a core group of over 1,000 Arlingtonians to formulate what they have named Vision 2020 — a blueprint for the town over three decades.

The recipe Gobhai uses — one he has patented over the years — is to begin by composing a “statement of direction.” Such a statement incorporates a “destination — where or what we want to be,” identifies a “path — the major strategy or strategies” to be followed and the vehicle or means — the strengths that the organization possesses which are powerful enough to help it attain its goals.

A statement of direction needs to have a focus. It must describe the end state or goal, become a “template by which current decisions can be gauged, tell us what we are not going to be or do.” As versus a comfortable validation of the current state of affairs, a statement of direction examines emerging trends: rather than clinging to past ideas and habits it addresses itself to the necessary transition. It needs to endure through changes of strategy or tactics which may be dictated by changing circumstances and has a motivational power that “energizes a corporation — a call to arms,” says Gobhai.

Gobhai pays particular heed to the motivational aspect. A statement which is simple, brief, clear, compelling can be understood and be committed to by the whole organization, he says. Its accent needs to be on quality — quantity comes later. It must breed a sense of participation even though it is articulated by the people at the top. To that effect it must be 100 percent credible, be based on a relevant strength — something that the group already has to be proud of, is unique to the organization and provides a day-to-day link for action and decisions.

Can Gobhai's methods help the community in Bombay? The Bombay born facilitator (a St Xavierite who graduated with maths and physics before going to the MIT for a degree in mechanical engineering and to Delft, Holland for a diploma in business management) advises, “Form a group. Make sure that all the major constituents are included: the Punchayet, other anjumans, Parsis married to Parsis, Parsis married to non-Parsis, mobeds, the orthodox, the liberals, one or two outstanding Parsis so that the group has credibility... and someone who can ensure that the dialogue is strategic, creative, collaborative. If we can define a target with the right level of ambition, I'd be interested...It would give

me pleasure if in some way I can contribute to creating a vision for the Parsi community.”

Gobhai had begun working in the research and development wing of a hightech company in the Boston area when the management surprised him by stating that they didn't care for his MIT degree but liked his ideas. Till then his “idea generation (had been) on the sly — not as a legitimate activity. Those people gave me permission to unlock my creativity. A pleasurable pastime was put at a premium!” Gobhai, who responded by earning 12 patents in a single year, continues to preserve a high regard for his ex-employers. “The important thing is not the value of the patents (which he acquired) but the abiding interest in the process of creativity” which their attitude unleashed. That passion for creativity has lasted through 30 years.

Gobhai realized that sometimes he was thinking creatively. At other times there were no ideas. Banding together with a couple of others to form a group called Synectics, Gobhai continued with research on how people create, initially concentrating on the business sector which became the principal beneficiary of his advice. He devised his techniques empirically, by studying successful groups and peoples, by observation, trial and error.

One of Gobhai's realizations is that outstanding ideas are not born that way. A problem often gives vent to a “wish” and from there to a “big, bad idea.” Edwin Land's daughter wished for instant pictures and suggested the big bad idea of putting a dark room into a camera. Backing away from that preposterous suggestion Land hit upon the concept that emerged as the polaroid camera, Gobhai illustrates the creative process.

In contrast to individual creativity, group creativity presupposes certain ground rules. Everyone cannot speak at the same time. So Gobhai sets himself up as air traffic controller, orchestrating the expression of ideas, demanding clarity, requesting articulation on paper. Budding baby ideas need to be protected from heat seeking missiles like rational criticism that zone in on them. Wishes, analogies must be fostered to promote big bad ideas.

“Thirty years ago I used to invent things,” notes Gobhai reflectively. “Now my work consists in helping top management reinvent the future of their organizations.”