



ARTICLE

IV

## WRITTEN OFF

- Cdr Sunil Anand

*"It takes three officers to write off a packet of (spoilt) peanuts and only one to write the three off"*

*-Anonymous*

It is difficult now, to remember exactly, but my first recollection of having heard the phrase 'Written off' goes back to the time when its definition (as per the logistics manual) viz "the legitimate removal of an item from the ledger of stores, usually resulting from justifiable or accidental termination of its life", had not yet been etched permanently in memory space. Subsequently, I am conscious of its repeated usage until it became amply clear that the term was used colloquially to imply that someones career pursuit had come to a final halt.

There was inevitably a pointed atmosphere that accompanied the topic and it varied in shades extending from poignant to celebration, depending upon whom the axe had fallen. In later years, I also had the opportunity to meet some 'written offs' and hear first hand of their chronicles. It cannot be denied that most were anguished and expressed degrees of bitterness (against someone or the system in general). Those who appeared to take this setback in their stride, and there were just a miniscule, soon succumbed in the face of constant condolences (this being the vogue under the given circumstances) of their well wishers and friends.

There appeared to be no dearth of written-off fellows, in various ranks and branches. No matter how high an office one gained, no matter what regard he enjoyed of his fellowmen; no matter how satisfying and meaningful his past had been - when the career progression halted, he was pronounced 'Written-off'. In many ways the whole thing began to appear as morbid and as certain as death. It emerged that sooner or later, it caught up with everyone; the only notable difference being that in the case of most written-offs, the casualty was himself the principal (and most voluble) mourner.

A closer study of the phenomenon revealed that though anyone with even an elementary understanding of the pyramidal structure in the hierarchy of the armed forces ought to have recognised the inevitability of this effect; hardly any were prepared to face the final outcome. Even those who had for years professed to 'leave the fruits to God', buckled when He did not send the next basket. Most blamed messengers in the chain (of reporting) and so often was the Service condemned. Their dispositions and temper clearly indicated that consoling considerations were badly outweighed by the perceived losses. It was obvious that career expectations had constituted the overwhelming element of satisfaction sought. It was equally apparent that few had consciously recognised or nurtured alternate sources of personal contentment. Hence all the 'eggs' of life's gratification were placed in the 'career basket'. In fact far too many people in their zest to nurture this 'Golden Goose', appeared to have allowed the withering away of other bounties. Family, friends, health, joy, hobbies & pastimes, individuality and even dignity had often been relegated to the backyard. To take shelter now, behind the 'call of duty' clause for this oversight was a theory full of holes. At the outset, they were themselves unable to draw solace from having done their duty to Thee and to the country. When the axe fell, they stood broken and alone. Why? They had never invested in anything other than the career. Why?

## **The Individual and The Organisation**

The individual and the organisation are both organisms striving for their existence. Hence an institution, whilst aiming to achieve its organisational goals cannot ignore the aspect of 'satisfaction' for the personnel who run its affairs.

**Incentives and Rewards.** In recognising that the larger part of humanity is driven by incentives, work is often obtained from people in exchange for rewards. This bargain has greatly benefited several associations, particularly those in the industry/production line. However, institutions whose realm extends into long term perspectives, such as abetting a national standing, have subscribed to this arrangement only to the minimum extent necessary. Even a cursory look at the modus operandi of such institutions, worldwide, makes it plain that they reckon in cultivating ethics.

**The 'Higher' Human Need.** Behavioral science reveals that the most glaring aspect which differentiates humans from other animals is their 'need for social acceptance'. It may plausibly be argued that every act of a human (other than basic needs like food, air, water etc) is aimed at gaining social acceptance. From money, power, social position, toil, patriotism, charity and benevolence, to telling a joke, writing an article or wearing a branded item; all are aimed at achieving this need viz the awe and admiration of our fellow beings.

**The Armed Forces Values.** It is not surprising that the Armed Forces of most countries invest in nurturing traits like honour, dignity and pride, rather than keeping focus merely on short term concerns and rewards thereof. Not only does this help meet organisational goals, but also establishes the organisation as an institution whose intrinsic strength makes it a dependable pillar supporting the nation. Notwithstanding the vast changes in the values in our society, there is great regard for the Services and its people. Clearly, a person groomed on values is sought, not only in the service, but also in society at large.



**Personality Development.** Ever since my days as a trainee, I have been conscious that the Services lay great stress on developing the personalities of its people. Our syllabus, rather than confining to fields specific to the (fighting) profession, included subjects like poetry and arts. Considerable attention was paid to extra curricular activities. Subsequently too, officers were rated more for their personal qualities and traits rather than quantifiable results or achievements.

**Quality Life.** Facilities and opportunities continue to be provided at considerable cost, so as to nurture and groom these traits. This healthy and balanced lifestyle has not only benefited the service in the long run but also explains how individual satisfaction was sought to be provided in the Armed Forces, where other than life being strife with hardships including great mortal risk, there is the reality of high rejection rate in the promotion chain.

### **The Clash of Interests**

There will often be a dichotomy between the needs of an individual and those of the organisation/nation. Hence, handing over the affairs of an organisation into the hands of an individual, though inescapable, is fraught with risks; especially in a hierarchy.

Efficiency in the Armed Forces, not being question to specific output, poses a very subjective analysis of individual competence. The proof of ones accomplishments and efficiency during peace will come to bear on the organisation as indeed (other) individuals at a very later date. For a time endured institution like the armed forces, whose goals reach far into the future, it would therefore be tenuous to groom individuals merely for the term of their career.

**Me First.** For all the career remunerations it could bring, 'loyalty' could come to be owed to a person in the chain rather than to the organisation. Honour could give way to sycophancy and the analysis of traits could be subject to individual whims and fancies. Professional demands could be replaced by individuals, utilising the hierarchy, to fulfill their void for a taste of social

acceptance. This in turn would have a direct impact on the working ethos eg individuals suffering from mid-life blues or social ostracism could now easily turn their loneliness to advantage by portraying extra hours at work as 'hardworking nature'; the sort who would credit Taj Mahal to the Mules. As such people rise; the focus would shift from the development of higher traits to quantifiable performance. Though this may be bureaucratically sound, it is unlikely to serve the longer interests of the service, which would become more inefficient with lesser time not only for conceptualisation and deliberate planning but also to develop traits (and thus lesser future leaders) amongst our personnel; exactly the opposite of what the organisation set out to achieve ; ever since basic training.

**The Rat Race.** Among the many phrases that are used as common parlance, 'Rat Race' is one. It has come to be spoken of with an unpretentious accepted-ness that to me is unnerving, for the term brings to mind, a grab and run scenario; a blind and singular pursuit. A (philosopher!) friend once told me the three rules of the rat race : -

*Rule 1:* it is self compounding (viz in its pathway, those who don't move with it; get stampeded).

*Rule 2 :* As you go higher, the price of cheese only increases.

*Rule 3:* No matter who wins - he is still a rat.

**Fallout - The Sour Grapes.** In the sequel of 'The Fox and the Sour Grapes', the fox decided to go for the grapes. He toiled hard and jumped higher. Finally, he reached the grapes and collected some bunches. His fellows cheered and lauded his success (Rule 1 of the Rat Race); some from genuine awe and some merely in the hope of extracting rewards. This egged the fox to jump more. Later, when he tasted the grapes, he was horrified to find that they were infact ....sour! How could they be! "But everyone gave me to believe, I thought..."; he neither had the astuteness, nor the time to ponder. Moreover, the cheering and the acclaim were dizzying.



So he took the only viable option - he kept jumping and had to keep eating the tart grapes (Rule 2 of the Rat Race). By the time the flock of cheerers shifted their attention to the next (and emerging stronger) fox, it was too late to realise the difference between friends and opportunists. In time, he inevitably lost his health and inner peace (Rule 3 of the Rat Race).

With mere 'Gaadi, Bangla, Naukar' becoming the focus for attaining the awe of others (as perhaps emanates from the societal image of success) leaves one to wonder if so many of the men in high office have indeed attained the lofty ideals they may have set out in the dream of achieving.

**Introspection - The Individual and the Organisation Revisited.** In a military setup, a person who is seen to hold his career first is unlikely to have a positive following. Since this person shares his life amongst the same people, this is bound to affect his standing in the community viz social acceptance; the most important need of a human. Hence, if career is seen as the chief incentive, there is bound to be a rat race of sorts making the runners oblivious to the very objective(s) of their lives and of the organisation.

**The Service Comes First.** Though individual aspirations may drive a person to better output, this pursuit cannot be allowed to overtake organisational goals. The organisation must not lose sight that careerists by-and-large work in exchange for a career and such a model may not eventually promote 'Service above Self'.

**Persona.** In any event, individuals who, in the focus on their own ends, have trampled the norms of society and/or treaded on others' toes are unlikely, in the end, to impress people with the gold (or brass) it was traded for. It is for individuals to recognise that though stars and stripes may bring great prominence, at least whilst in power, these are only intermediate to the goal of life

ie. contentment. Here, a greater need viz that of social acceptance would be more pervasive. If the Bollywood image of the Fauji Sahib is to be gauged, it would be clear that it is the disciplined and upright man with the booming laugh and unassuming manner who, notwithstanding his rank, receives the admiration of others.

**Back to Basics.** Perhaps the need of the moment is to make the organisation exuberant. Corporate enterprises today are being sought not merely for their pay package but also the satisfaction levels they assure as per contract. One may attribute this merely to 'the grass on the other side being greener' or take cognisance that we too may use 'fertilisers'. Managerial acumen, said to have evolved from the armed forces, is more visible in corporate sectors, who are increasingly accepting the need to have happy minds as their workforce. They are investing in Jacks to play, to provide a congenial work atmosphere, professional and personnel interaction (at amicable locations), insistence on time for employees with their families (eg. Companies are taking a growing pride in being able to stick to working hours). This, despite their specific and omnibexistent output considerations which translate visibly on their balance sheets, has shown greater productivity.

**In Ensemble.** Since the fate of the organisation is entwined with its personnel, it behoves that the Service invests in the kind of people who are willing to bind themselves with the fate of the organisation. Rather than aiming to create the alls well feeling by attending to immediate (and tenure/career long) concerns, it must nurture in them a philposophy which helps them find gratification in life.

The interest and emancipation of the organisation and its individuals lies in developing character. As in a ship, they will sail or sink together; It is together that they may well prosper or be written off ; together.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cdr Sunil Anand (03248-F) was commissioned on 01 Jan 88 and subsequently specialised in Gunnery (1994). He has served afloat and ashore including as an instructor at the National Defence Academy.

