

The struggle for authenticity in Dhaka's professional world

Growing up, when I shared some of my parents' stories with my peers, I soon realised not everyone in Dhaka shared their experiences, especially their freedom of expression.

Much like any other city, Dhaka too is divided into its many bubbles based on financials and belief systems. When I entered the workforce in my twenties, I realised it applied to my experiences in the workplace as well. This is mostly because of the Arts and Humanities background I come from, if you know one, you know them all.

I learned to accept that relationships within some of these circles remained quite the utopia when others outside of it faced a different reality. It dawned on me that progressive bubbles have a tendency to gate-keep, almost everywhere.

In my professional capacity, I have tried to challenge that attitude and hold those gates, wide open. Someone I admire professionally once said, you do not have to be in a leadership role to lead. You can lead from any position.

As I spread out my wings across the globe, working in various settings, I realised how true this was and how the influence could flow bottom-up, as much as it trickles top-down.



Here are some ways I have seen this in action.

People pleasing leading nowhere

One of the well-known tactics used in "desi workplaces" is the art of flattery. Have I seen it work? Yes, of course. Have I dabbled into it from time to time? When I was younger perhaps, yes. Have I seen it continuing to work over time? No!

The most unsuccessful part about people pleasing is that it can never gain you real respect in the eyes of the person you please. Once you lose respect by being ingenuine, it's a treacherous road to recovery and despite hundred fan followers, you might find it challenging to respect yourself again.

Overtime as well, you will find you have to keep repeating this behaviour till one day it eventually wears its charm off.

The false urgency

Unless you work in an emergency unit and you are physically and emotionally trained to operate under stressful circumstances, nobody should be able to pressurise you into action.

Let's face it, getting something done

quicker actually requires focus and concentration and minimal disruption, not speed. A good quality project is a product of creative energy and deep reflection, not a strategy that's developed in survival mode.

The world is full of trigger-happy leaders right now who believe in quick action. My feminine wisdom would rather like to see them all in a rocking chair, knitting beautiful sweaters. Because that's the decorum that makes for a true leader, the ability to regulate emotions and remain calm, unrushed when it comes to making a decision that influence lives outside their own.

Identity crisis

After years trying to pinpoint the barriers facing most "deshis" in landing that authentic voice, I must admit I still don't know what the primary trigger leading to

that incapability is. It applies to everyone along the food chain too, no matter the level of success, there's hardly anyone who's truly themselves. Especially, in their professional lives, we have cookie cutter version of employees occupying each level with nearly zero original thought.

In a labour-intensive work environment, this might be justifiable but in a cushy corporate position, people should be able to think for themselves, without looking for instructional leadership. This goes both ways, if an employee behaves as a responsible professional at the same time as the leader, they report to, treating them as an adult equal, the equation could look very different.

An employee is bound to do their work as per a signed agreement, then how this manager-team member relationship quickly turns into a principal reprimanding children in a school situation is a mystery.

Work-life balance

When I was growing up, an aunty in my neighbourhood who happened to be a doctor would be known as doctor aunty — a doctor servicing everyone they know. We often would not know their name. One might argue that it might be a good idea to know their names now, as there are a fair few doctor aunts in the world but exactly when and why being known for what you do for a living, stopped being cool, I'm not sure. But I have a hunch.

Between my parents and my generation, employment for people with a higher education started to replicate that of a factory, except with fancy amenities. Hordes

of BBA graduates, marketing executives doing work that their parents till now can neither grasp nor explain. This was the start of an era where meaningful work and professions started taking a backseat.

Now whilst we can't turn back time or move away from the technology boom that is continuing to evolve, something that can be reinvented to avoid an easy burnout or from leading a life you constantly need a holiday from, can be a return to finding that meaning.

If you are working as a sales executive and you have the luxury to choose, may be choose a product or organisation you actually believe in. Again, not everyone has this privilege but if you do, let's not waste it. Identifying the purpose that you serve as a small piece in a bigger puzzle can be a game changer.

If you are walking away reading this thinking, what was new about anything I mentioned, it was not meant to be a TED talk or an attempt to place responsibility on self when the bigger problem might be a lack of healthy options to choose from. This was more a call to creative action for systemic change. A call to say, wherever you are, occupying whichever position, you have an impact on those working above you, below you, and around you.

If you have been waiting to witness a change in your workplace culture, and it has not come from someone else yet, you can bring these changes to life.

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Photo: Collected

