

‘IS MY ATTITUDE GETTING ON MY WAY?’ – A YOUNG ACADEMICIAN’S DILEMMA

‘On the second day of my joining, the managing director of the institution called me with a few other colleagues of mine to his office and explained the need for us to engage in very responsible accreditation work. I was a bit hesitant, but more than that, I was surprised and wondering, how can a person who has just joined a day before be given such a demanding job? I said, “I will not disappoint you, however, that’s not my forte”.’ – Mithali

(There was silence after this for a few seconds. Before Mithali could understand anything, the director said, ‘But learning is important. Isn’t it?’)

While working at her desk, Mithali got lost in her thoughts. ‘Is my attitude getting in my way?’ she asked herself. Gradually, she observed that the work culture was highly compliance based. Everyone seemed so busy in the office – away from their desks, meeting their respective committee heads and team members and deliberating on the ideas they were supposed to implement towards building the institution, and keeping it up and running. But Mithali was an exception – sitting at her desk and doing the work that she loved to do: her research. ‘Why am I not happy, then? What am I worried about? These thoughts raced through her.

Introduction and the Situation

Mithali (female) was a 38-year-old academician who lived with her husband and daughter. She had recently finished her doctorate from one of India’s top institutions and joined one of the reputable institutions in Delhi a year back. When she joined her PhD programme, she also started her family, and during her doctoral studies, she gave birth to her daughter. Due to these dual responsibilities, she felt as if her two separate clocks were moving in opposite directions. She was intelligent. In her

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initial teaching career at the institution, she received excellent feedback from her students. They liked her because of her strong hold on her subjects and her open, engaging nature with them. Rather than teaching students, she learned and co-created with them. However, she always regretted that – due to the unexpected overlap between her professional and personal career – she did not get a chance to do better in her research while completing her PhD. Nevertheless, she knew that research was an important pillar of any academician's career. Moreover, the recently introduced mandate stated that faculty members must have quality publications and a strong research profile to be eligible for the annual performance appraisal.

The Dilemma

Mithali now wanted to prove her research worth; hence, she remained very focused on her work. She never took interest in any administrative or other non-academic work in her office although she displayed good leadership skills through her personality. One possible reason why she could maintain this detachment from her institution was that she was aspirational about moving to a better place with an open, flexible environment. However, she knew that moving to a better place meant that she would need to show her strength in her research. She was also aware that any quality publication could take at least two years—or even longer. She was focused on achieving her research objectives—so focused that she once denied her senior colleagues' request to lead a critical committee when the head of that committee was absent. Her colleagues offered her this opportunity because they were confident about her potential; however, they were ultimately disappointed. This sent signals throughout the institution that she was categorically prioritizing her personal goals, putting the institution in second—or even third place taking into account her family priorities too—in the name of work-life balance.

Gradually, people around her understood that she put her personal goals as a priority over the institution. Even as she tried to stay focussed and struggled to prove her worth in research, Mithali started noticing that her colleagues became distant from her as they were all occupied with their teaching, administrative and institution-building activities together, and didn't expect Mithali to offer a helping hand to them. Mithali still maintained her composure while focussing on her work and the scenario persisted. Nevertheless, she was confident that two of her current research works would soon be published and stand out on her research profile. However, she was wrong. She found those two papers continuously being rejected by one journal after another. Mithali was distressed, yet she could not understand the possible flaws in both of these papers. She also wrote a case study but she knew that even a published case study would not add as much value to her research profile as journal papers. Through the whole process of writing papers and finding them rejected, Mithali realized that she had missed an important rule of thumb for succeeding in the academic system—that of collaborating with like-minded researchers in the area. She always thought she could independently write multiple papers at her own will and get them published fast, but collaboration was the trend that most scholars followed to bring diversity to their research ideas.

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Collaborating also helped in making their research work more reliable and valid. She found herself all alone in her journey and clueless about navigating ahead from this situation. She knew that it would take at least two more years for her to gain stability in research from her current position. Her daughter was growing up and Mithali had a different level of engagement with her and her family at home as well. Her stress level was building up and she missed having friends at work with whom she could talk frankly and discuss her personal and professional life. While her colleagues had their respective informal groups, Mithali was always found to be alone at work. Her chances to join other institutions were reduced even further, and she was now sure she would have to be in the same institution for quite some time—at least for another year or two. She also knew that she would not be able to sustain herself in the same institution the way she was operating. She was going to soon complete a year at the institution and the performance appraisal was due shortly. She had not earned many credits through the year which could substantially get her a favourable appraisal. She started to melt and found asking herself the following question:

“Shall I change my approach towards my work and be involved in other non-academics-related administrative work too?”

She thought this might help her share a good bond with her colleagues and create good promotional opportunities for herself within the institution. Her colleagues, who were engaged in administrative and other institutional work, shared a very good rapport among themselves and were able to earn appreciation from the management too. They also had good promotional opportunities within the institution in terms of their roles, responsibilities and salary. However, as per the grapevine, they all also complained, within their small private circles, that they were overburdened with administrative and institution-building work; so much so that they were not able to find enough time to prepare for their teaching hours too. Except for a few, they all found it very hard to pursue research. This confused Mithali further and she was clueless about the right way to go about this.

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