

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

Abstract: Mithali (female) is a 38-year-old academician who lives in a nuclear family, has recently finished her doctorate at one of India’s top institutions and joined a reputable institution a year ago. While completing her PhD, she also raised her daughter; consequently, she could not focus on her research and was lagging behind the desired research quotient, which she had to attain to advance in her career. Compensating for the lack of research, she focuses on her primary job of teaching and, after that, with whatever time was left, she conducts research. She prioritizes her research and her family. Accordingly, on a few occasions, she has turned down the institutional administrative work offered by the senior management and her senior colleagues. Lately, she has found that her peers in the institution are distancing themselves from her, and Mithali has started to realize that this might be due to the attitude that she has shown towards institutional administrative work. On one side, she is heading towards unfavourable appraisal at work; on the other side, two of her research papers have been rejected. She aspires to attain a better future but sees no chance; for at least a year or two, her situation will remain the same. If she continues the way she used to, it might dampen her career in her current workplace, and if she engages in administrative work, she might lose time for her research – which could get her better career options. She is unclear as to whether she should correct her attitude towards work or continue to be assertive in her approach, focusing only on her long-term research goals.

Learning Objectives

Detailed study and analysis of this case will provide the students with an understanding of the following:

- The challenges of the workplace
- The importance of the right attitude for the career

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- The right use of assertiveness in the workplace
- The impact of one's decisions on their short-term and long-term career

Position in Course

The increasing importance of work-life balance, mental well-being and stress management, not only in organizations but also in academia, makes this case study a must-read. This case can be a guide for young employees towards making right choices in their initial careers. It can serve as a tool to explain organizational behaviour concepts like attitude, job satisfaction, and personality. Students are not expected to have prior knowledge about any of the above. However, they will be required to study the following readings before coming to the class for case discussion.

Recommended Readings

1. Facing your Mid-Career crisis. Kieran Setiya. (April 2019). Harvard Business Review.
2. Listen up! How to be appropriately assertive. James G. Clawson, Gerry Yemen and Maria pazFigini. (Mar 2004). Harvard Case (UV0123-PDF-ENG).
3. A simple way to be more assertive (without being pushy). Andy Molinsky. (Aug 2017). Harvard Case. H03VII-PDF-ENG

Supplemental Material

1. Hire for attitude, Train for skills. Bill Taylor. (Feb, 2011). Harvard Business Review.
2. Obama and the Peace Prize: "A" for Attitude. Michale D. Watkins. (Oct, 2009). Harvard Business Review
3. Rethink what you "know" about high-achieving women. Ely, Pamela Stone and Colleen Ammerman. (Dec 2014). Harvard Business Review.
4. The one skill all the leaders should work on. Scott Edinger. (Mar, 2012) Harvard Case. H008KY-PDF-ENG

Teaching Plan

The case study should be distributed to the students at least two days before the discussion and the students are expected to come prepared with the same. The instructor should form teams of 5-6 members each. Each team has to work collectively on the case analysis and all teams may come

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up with similar or unique solutions as per their understanding and efforts. A 60-minutes session can be conducted as follows:

Discussion Areas	Time (60 Mins)
Summary and the opening of the case	10
Discussion around the personality type of Mithali and behaviour pattern	10
The dilemma – is it real or perceived?	05
Theories around attitude and assertiveness	20
Conclusion – What happened and what would have you done as Mithali	15

Assignment Questions

1. Differentiate between the functioning of corporates vis-à-vis academic institutions.
2. What are the different competencies required of their employees by both types of organizations?
3. Compare the response strategies to the current situation of Mithali along with their consequences in general and their impact on her career.
4. What would you do if you were in Mithali's place? Why?

Case Analysis

This case study presents a dilemma that most young faculty members in academia face in their careers at least once. There are multiple theories through which Mithali's behaviour can be further explained.

To begin with, the instructor may introduce the concept of attitude using the case of Mithali's behaviour. Attitude can be explained using three components: Affective, Cognitive and Behavioural. The affective component refers to one's feelings about an object, person or event. It can be positive, negative or neutral. Mithali's statement "*administrative tasks are not my forte*" represented her negative affect towards administrative tasks. The Cognitive component involves the information one processes after experiencing certain feelings for the said object, person or

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event. For example, Mithali's belief that she would have to stay away from administrative tasks to conduct quality research represented the cognitive component of her attitude. However, this may or may not be the case in reality, and there might be examples of people who are extremely good researchers and great administrators both at the same time. The Behavioural component involves the behavioural outcomes of affective and cognitive components. In this case, Mithali's outright rejection to work on assignments given by her peers and superiors is an example of a behavioural component, and this behaviour can be explained as a consequence of her affective and cognitive processing for that event.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

According to the Cognitive Dissonance theory proposed by Festinger (1957)¹, if two attitudes or an attitude and behaviour are not consistent with each other, individuals experience a cognitive conflict known as dissonance, which might harm one's psychological or mental well-being. Because of the aversive nature of cognitive dissonance, an individual might try to modify either an attitude or a behaviour². In the present case study, while Mithali is in a dilemma, she is experiencing a state of cognitive dissonance since she is not happy working on her research projects even though she wants to and she has the space to do so. She is also hesitant to engage in administrative tasks as she thinks getting involved with other institutional tasks will keep her away from her individual goals of doing quality research. However, she is also aware that engaging in administrative tasks could help her build a good rapport and friendship with her colleagues at work. Ultimately, she ends up being confused about whether to keep doing what she was doing or change her approach at work.

Social Judgement Theory

Social Judgment Theory, first proposed by Carolyn Sherif, Muzafer Sherif, Roger Nebergall, and Carl Hovland (1961)³ is also known as Self-Persuasion Theory. This theory proposes that individuals perceive and evaluate their change in attitude concerning the existing attitudes and the consequences. The change in attitude is determined by three aspects: the level of ego involved in the attitude, the direction of the attitude held, and the nature of the stimulus. After facing difficulties

¹ Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance (Vol. 2). Stanford University Press.

² Kitayama, S., & Tompson, S. (2015). A biosocial model of affective decision making: Implications for dissonance, motivation, and culture. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 52, pp. 71-137). Academic Press.

³ Hovland, Carl I.; Sherif, Muzafer (1980). Social judgment (Reprint from 1961 ed.). Westport: Greenwood. ISBN 0313224382.

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at the workplace and in her research work, Mithali considers a change in her attitude. This can mean that the involvement of her ego (self) is high in this case due to which she becomes flexible and considers changing her attitude. However, she is not able to stimulate the idea of change in her attitude because of the uncertain direction of the new attitude. Although she knows that the new attitude might help her in her workplace currently, she is not sure how she would navigate through her long-term career if she fails to pursue research.

Goal Conflict Theory

Mithali's situation can also be understood using the Goal Conflict Theory. According to this theory, cognitive conflict and goal conflict lead to decreased goal commitment, which ultimately leads to poor performance. The case doesn't talk about performance; however, Mithali's lack of commitment for organizational goals can be sensed. Expectancy, self-efficacy and need for achievement can impact goal commitment as said by Slocum et. al, (2002)⁴ in their paper on the Goal Conflict theory. According to the Expectancy theory, efforts put forth for attaining certain goals depend on the perceived value of the outcomes attained by those efforts. Accordingly, if Mithali doesn't value the short-term outcomes of performing administrative tasks, she will not be willing to perform those tasks. However, if Mithali values workplace bonding as an important outcome, she might like to change her attitude towards administrative tasks and may like to perform them. As per the self-efficacy theory, not performing administrative tasks can also be attributed to a lack of competence. As far as need for achievement is concerned, only those who are excellent in research are considered successful in the academic community. Mithali's need for achievement, in this case, drives her away from administrative tasks and keeps her busy in research as she attaches achievement to research.

A1. Functioning of corporates vis-à-vis academic institutions

Corporates and academia function in completely different ways from each other. While business organizations are for-profit organizations, academic institutions are considered to be not-for-profit organizations. Institutions are founded in the name of trusts, and although they make business through earning tuition fees and donations from public and private donors, the impact of the education they impart remains at a macro level. Structurally, business organizations have different departments or business units, and their key employees engage in managing the day-to-day internal and external affairs; in academia on the other side, key employees like faculty members

⁴ Slocum Jr, J. W., Cron, W. L., & Brown, S. P. (2002). The effect of goal conflict on performance. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 9(1), 77-89.

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and administrative staff are engaged in imparting education for different programs and facilitating students for the same. In academia, students are themselves the customers as well as products, unlike corporates where customers consume products. As far as scale and size are concerned, it varies from firm to firm and institution to institution. Organizations can be classified as private limited, public limited or limited liability partnership firms; institutions, on the other hand, may be governed by the state or centre, or there might be private universities and autonomous institutions which are independent of any regulatory governing body.

A2. Competencies required by the academics and industry

Business professionals are required to possess basic conceptual, technical, managerial and human competencies for performing their jobs successfully, and different competencies or multiple combinations of competencies and skills are required at different levels. On the other hand, faculty members as the prime stakeholders, are highly intellectual in nature, are required to be excellent in imparting education in the classroom or online mode as well as excellent in research. Both the functions need strong communication skills. They are required to publish their research work in high-quality journals for which they need to be exceptionally good at collaborations. Faculty members are also engaged in other institution-building activities, which are intellectual and administrative in nature and require good interpersonal skills. In today's competitive scenario, faculty members are under tremendous pressure for publishing and are required to be up-to-date with the industry requirements. At a broader level, they are also expected to mentor and motivate students to do better in life.

A3. Response strategies and consequences

Mithali can respond to the current situation by taking any of the following two decisions. This table explains the consequences attached to both the decisions.

Decision	Advantages	Disadvantages
She continues focusing on research and maintaining distance from her colleagues while not getting much involved with administrative tasks as she knows that she will be in that place for a short period of time.	She might bring out substantial research work that will help her find and settle in a better workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She might lose out on a positive appraisal • Negative reputation at the workplace • Lack of fruitful relationships at work • She might get laid off even before moving to a better place

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<p>She gets involved with institutional and administrative work and manages her research work in the time left.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She will learn administrative skills which could prove to be useful to her in the future • She could have better interrelationships and social skills at work • She may get a favourable appraisal • Improved reputation at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She might lose focus on her research work • There might be a delay in career settlement
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A4. What would you do

This question is open-ended and the instructor may help students to critically think about the choice they make in terms of how are they going to navigate through the situation. As there is no right or wrong answer, the instructor should not influence their decision whatever it may be. To help them be conscious of the possible consequences of their choice, questioning them for each decision point will help.

What Happened

Mithali belonged to Kolkata and she shared a very good rapport with her supervisor who also used to be her mentor. She once discussed the whole issue with her supervisor who suggested she should focus on research and not worry about the appraisal in the short term. However, she also mentioned that it wouldn't be possible for her to completely get away with institutional matters and tasks, and that ultimately, institutional objectives must be placed at the top of her list. Hence, Mithali was advised to bring out a fair balance in both her research work and her engagements at the workplace. According to her this could be achieved through a fair balance between assertiveness in some matters and acceptance in some. This way Mithali would also be able to have good relations at the workplace. Mithali was convinced by her mentor's advice and followed her suggestions religiously. She started showing selective interest in administrative tasks, but whatever she would do, she made sure to get excellent outcomes. In the meantime, she also planned to relocate to her hometown. Within 6-7 months, she got an opportunity to work in one of the bigger and better institutions in Kolkata. She left her current job and moved back to Kolkata. After a year or so, she also got her papers published in reputed journals along with a case study published by Ivey publishing.

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