

## **The Economic Times**

### **Family Matters**

#### **The Pursuit of Youth**

**By Gitanjali Prasad**

In a state and a country where we are attuned to the reverse syndrome, where only the old and infirm are seen in leadership positions, especially in the political arena, it may sound surprising that there could be a downside to a policy of identifying and rewarding youth rather than age or experience.

Surely, this has to be the hallmark of a forward –looking company that is vigorous and dynamic, and which will benefit with having young managers who will lead with the skills and the mind set required in fast changing times. A managing director who assumes charge at 40 will have the time to introduce changes that he can guide and direct for two decades. How much better than what commonly happens in the PSUs, chief executives assuming charge just a year or two before retirement?

However, there is reason to question whether, just because one scenario is obviously faulty, the reverse is necessarily good. A senior manager who had just left a company, which later underwent a major re–organization exercise, was not surprised when former colleagues checked out whether there were suitable slots for them. However, when he scrutinized the requests, he was stunned to see that many were from executives who had actually jumped several rungs up the ladder!

Strangely, many of those who had been handpicked for accelerated promotion, were the very executives who wished to leave. "We do not see a future for ourselves in this company", the executives confided. The executives realized that a new boss, or changed circumstances could see them in exactly the same predicament that their less fortunate colleagues were now in.

Organizational experts are familiar with this phenomenon, which is akin to the "survivor syndrome" or the guilt complex experienced by many survivors of calamities. A situation where merit is secondary to age and experience

kills initiative and leads to the non-functioning situation we are only too familiar with. However, to move from a situation where we effectively discriminated against youth to a situation where we actually discriminate against age, leads to a situation that is fraught with other negatives.

"The feeling is that if you have not made it to senior management level by the age of forty, you are out ", is a statement you will hear increasingly in corporate corridors today. Most evident in the dotcom bubble that has now burst, a prejudice against the 40 plus is believed to be there in other companies as well. It is seen as the trend of the future if not the reality of today. And of course it is a viewpoint that is most evident in the MNCs.

It's not surprising then that the number one reason people go in for cosmetic surgery The US is job related. In addition there are other negatives to a mindset where seniority no longer has value. "The fact that seniority no longer means security means somebody has to look committed even if they're not committed", says Phyllis Moen of Cornell University. In other ways too, style may take precedence over substance as everybody tries to catch the boss's eye.

From the point of view of the family, great responsibility being given to people in their thirties and early forties means that they have to be under greater job related stress when their children are young and need greatest attention. The father's contribution in the home, whether it is helping out with household chores, or being involved with child care or later school related activities must take a back seat to deal with the increased demands of the work place. Such executives and their families often come close to breaking point as they try to cope with conflicting demands.

Ironically, when executives are older, have fewer family commitments and have the experience and the time to contribute more effectively in the work place, they are put out to pasture! This serves the interests neither of the younger executive nor of his older colleague. In an era when people are going to be living longer, and where increased and better medical services should see that people stay fitter longer it makes sense to use their skills for a longer rather than for shorter time.

JJ Irani is a contemporary corporate legend who won virtually every business record for his company in the recent past. He was 65 when he retired from

the post of Managing Director earlier this year, and he has gone on to a bigger responsibility! At the end of the day, as Leena Chatterjee, Professor of Behavioural Science of the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta points out, " I don't think any one should be judged by chronological age. What really matters is a person's skill sets and ability to learn and to grow. By stereotyping age, especially if there is a bias against age as may be the case in some MNCs, people will lose out on very valuable experience."