

## **Managing a Hostel Mess**

### **The early training of a future Management Teacher**

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I recently happened to be at Tezpur University, my *Alma Mater*. I met some of my former hostel mates who are now faculty members at the University. One of them is Mr. Santanu Sharma, a Lecturer in the Department of Electronics. He was doing his M. Tech in Electronics Design & Technology when I was pursuing M. Sc. in Mathematics. As such, I used to call him *Santanu Da* even though we entered the hostel together. As we were just chatting in his cabin, one of his colleagues happened to be there. *Santanu Da* introduced me to him like this: “Meet Himadri. We were at the University hostel together. He served us the best food in the mess and charged the least money!” I just smiled at the very unconventional introduction. I took *Santanu Da’s* leave after spending some more time.

Flashback to Circa 2000 A.D. It was mid February if I remember correctly. My good friend Pranab (Deka) wanted to take charge of the hostel mess and approached me. I agreed to his proposal as I believed that the mess could be run better. Moreover, I will not have to pay my mess dues once I take charge. In the mess meeting held on the last day of February, our friends (mainly those in the Department of Mathematical Sciences) proposed our name as the new mess managers. The proposal was accepted without much fuss and the mess was handed over to us. We took over the functioning of the mess from March 2000. Pranab and I understood each other well. To put it more bluntly, there was mutual trust & respect. We set our respective roles - he would manage the Finance and I would concentrate on the operations.

Up till then, the purchase of goods for the mess was done by the boarders - two of them had to take the responsibility each day. They were paid ‘tea charges’ of around Rs.20/- each for their services. This arrangement was working, but the mess manager(s) many a time had to look for replacements or go on their own when the originals expressed their inability to go. I thought over this arrangement and decided to do away with it altogether. The purchasing duty was transferred to the mess workers the boarders employed - two cooks and three helpers. I made some additional arrangements to see to it that the workers had minimal scope for filling their pockets while doing the purchasing. A Grocery Shop was fixed from where all items were procured apart from the daily consumables like vegetables. A strict watch was maintained on the prices of the daily consumables also. Besides this, I made it very clear to the workers that I trusted them and they would face the music if the trust is broken. The Grocery Shop owner was also told in clear terms about the trust factor. Moreover I assured him that he would never have to ask for payments.

The plan worked. I no longer had to assign boarders everyday for the purchasing. The boarders were very happy as the purchase was a headache for many of them. The workers were also very happy as they were now getting the additional ‘tea charges’ every day which was earlier being paid to the boarders. This for me was a classic win-win-win situation.

To improve operations and services further, the quality of the items / goods was given special attention. Even the rice that was now procured was changed to a *branded* one. Wastages were minimized with strict instructions, collections from guests were streamlined. Cleanliness was given special priority with a special cleaning every Sunday without fail under my direct supervision. I also started the preliminary work for enhancing the wages of the workers and went ahead with giving them special discretionary allowances like medical bill reimbursements, etc. This improved my relationship with the workers.

It was customary in our hostel mess to have a special month ending dinner. On that day, the mess managers give all the accounts and hand over the mess to the new incumbents. We gave a special dinner of fried rice with custard, sweets and of course double the quota of chicken / *paneer*. We had managed to give the highest surplus till date. The hostel boarders unanimously agreed that we be given another term which we agreed to. We were given two

more extended terms subsequently. Thereafter, Pranab became the *Mess Convener* while I was made the hostel *Prefect*. It is another story that the "Prefectship" had to wait for many months due to some unsavoury hostel politics.

Looking back, managing the hostel mess where around 150 boarders took food gave me invaluable management insights. It taught me that Management is about relationship, about personal integrity, about getting a done in the best possible manner within the resources available, about embracing well meant criticism, about giving others the benefit of doubt, about striking balances and above all about continuously learning and unlearning. May be, unknowingly I was getting prepared for a stint in a Management Institute!

**Footnote:**

Pranab is today himself a successful manager and an individual. He is a Territory Sales Manager (TSM) with Aircel and has previously worked at Amul and Philips. Happily married, he owns a luxury car and flat at Guwahati. And mind you he still has no management qualification!