What's Holding Us Back? - Learning to Adapt in a Changing World

Fig 1: After having accepted the Head of Reporting position, of official college media body

This photograph was taken on the day I'd been promoted to the post of The Head of Reporting, of the MIT Post. The MIT Post is the official media body of my college. Having successfully worked in the organization as a staff writer, and subsequently as a junior editor, this post was reflective of the faith the organization had in my abilities. I remember how excited I'd been, walking around in black heels that clicked a little too loudly against the wooden floor. I remember how I kept tugging on a pencil skirt I wasn't used to wearing. As I stood on the stage, alongside my promoted colleagues, as a part of the new board of the MIT Post, I'd thought of all the wonderful ideas I would implement in my term.

> The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say "I." And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say "I." They don't think "I." They think "we"; they think "team."
>
> **Peter Drucker**

Notice how I talk about how I thought of the ideas 'I' would implement in my term. That in itself is an indicator of how naïve and inexperienced I was. In the year that followed, I would discover firsthand the difference between a subordinate post and a leadership post. I'd learn that coming up with ideas was easy, but smoothly implementing them, as a team, was an entirely different matter. I would spend longer editing articles than I would have spent writing them myself. I would discover what was acceptable to say and what wasn't, as a person wielding power. Many of these things, I learnt the painful way and yet, the insight they provided is unparalleled.

Having headed a group of roughly fifty articulate and opinionated juniors, with often starkly different viewpoints, I've come out of this experience a little wiser about my peers. What caught me off guard, however, wasn't their differences. Having worked in the organization for a while as a writer myself, I'd come to expect that much. It was their similarities that were truly remarkable.

1. Valuing External Information Over Internal Experience:-

The internet now has quality information about nearly every topic under the sun, often available free of cost. Therefore, it is tempting, and at times advisable to turn to it, when in doubt, than to consult an experienced individual for the same. After all, it is easy to obtain multiple experts' views on the topic of choice instantaneously. The latter would require booking an appointment, and actually talking to a person at length. There may be awkward pauses, displays of ignorance on either person's part or uncomfortable small talk at the beginning and end of sessions. There would be vulnerability that is becoming increasingly unacceptable by the day. It seems like a harder experience for a smaller tradeoff. As a result of such thought, whenever they were uncertain how to proceed in an article they'd been assigned, it wasn't their seniors the writers would turn to. It was the internet.
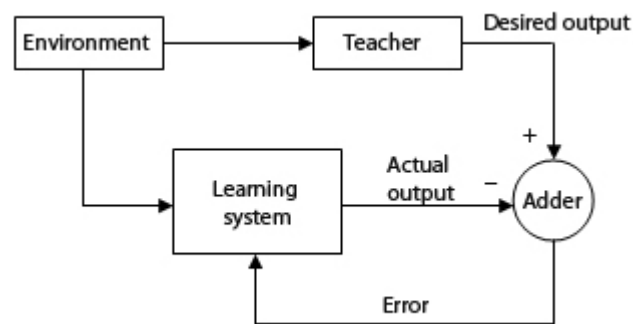
Fig2: Supervised learning block diagram

The problem with this argument, however, is the lack of feedback. A mentor can watch you grow and correct your mistakes on the basis of his own extensive experience. Take for example, the case of supervised learning I'd learnt about in Machine learning class. As shown in the figure, in supervised learning, the machine learns via a learning algorithm and the output it produces is compared with a desired output. The difference between the actual and desired output is fed back to the system as **feedback**. This continuous feedback is what is sorely lacking in simply learning off the internet. What one has understood from the material may not be what the information actually advocates, but no one will correct that mistake.

I have also observed this phenomenon in classrooms. Instead of using the internet as a medium to enhance one's understanding of a particular subject, it is used as a standalone source, after having slacked off in class. It is also, unfortunately, used as an accusatory medium to point to the

ignorance of teachers in certain areas. **What is important to understand is that while the internet is undoubtedly an excellent source of information, it is not a substitute for specific personal experience.** While the internet can offer ample information about an article a staff writer wants to write, I can do a better job of telling him where to look and how to write in a way that appeals to our particular set of readers. There has to be a balance.

2. Praising Successful Risk Takers But Condemning The Idea Of Taking Risks

"The one man to distrust, however, is the man who never makes a mistake, never commits a blunder, never fails in what he tries to do. He is either a phony, or he stays with the safe, the tried, and the trivial."
Peter Drucker, **Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices**

As a society, we respect and value people who have taken great risks and won. We idolize Elon Musk, who took a huge gamble by starting a Space based company and succeeded. The Facebook posts about the fact that Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey are college dropouts, are still doing the rounds. We admire them, but don't really advocate doing what they did. We are at a point where everything is changing and yet, we do not allow ourselves to take risks.

When I suggested a radicle article about colorism in India, my fellow board members weren't thrilled. Colorism is a reality in India, wherein people with lighter skin tones are treated far better than those who are visibly darker. What they didn't understand is why I would want to write about a controversial subject. Here we were, writing day after day about events going on in the campus, distant controversies across the globe we had little to do with and the like, while issues that actually affected us remained untouched. Although it took some convincing on my part, the article did come through and it went on to become the one of the most viewed articles on the page.

Fig3: Viewer statistics for The MIT Post

What seemed like a terrible idea at first actually went on to be widely accepted. While we thought we had our readers all figured out, we actually didn't. They were interested in something new and in initiating discussions. This was something we wouldn't have known, had we never ventured forth a seemingly dangerous article. Taking risks was vital for growth.

However, I do understand the reasons why putting this forth could have been disastrous. Had there been any incorrect details, or had the article been unintentionally offensive to any one community, it could easily have spiraled out of control. It is particularly easy for such matters to go viral as all it takes is a couple of shares. One single article can bring down organizations, especially small, independent ones like ours, in a heartbeat. **It is much harder to have to fail today, than ever before, as one's failure can be broadcasted to the world.**

3. **Avoiding, Instead of Beating The Competition**

A creative man is motivated by the desire to achieve, not the desire to beat others

Ayn Rand

Often, it is tempting to enter a highly competitive area in an attempt to beat the competition and rise to the top. It feels like a victory, of sorts. We've grown up, being taught the value of healthy competition and how everyone benefits from it. However, I have often wondered how beneficial it actually is. If very talented people are at each other's throats all the time, slighting the other to climb a little higher, are we as a society really benefitting?

As the Head of Reporting, I could at my discretion, give a new direction to the organization. I decided to put that power to use. From what I noticed, a lot of our content was similar to the content generated by a rival body. I felt disheartened that talented writers were competing with each other to write about similar topics. It all boiled down to who got more views, who used more flamboyant language and other inconspicuous details. The actual content was losing out.

I decided to venture into an area the other body hadn't touched upon. I would introduce weekly opinion editorials on issues that had made the National headlines. This column was named **'Between the Lines'**. To complement the intensity of the matter, I would introduce a simultaneous cultural column called '**Fine print**'. Yet again, there were heated discussions among the members of the board. Valid Concerns were raised. No one really wanted to venture into the arena of politics. It seemed dangerous and divisive. I was, however, of the opinion that unless we, as a student media body initiated such open debates, no one would. It wasn't just our privilege, it was our duty. After particularly long consideration, these columns were introduced.
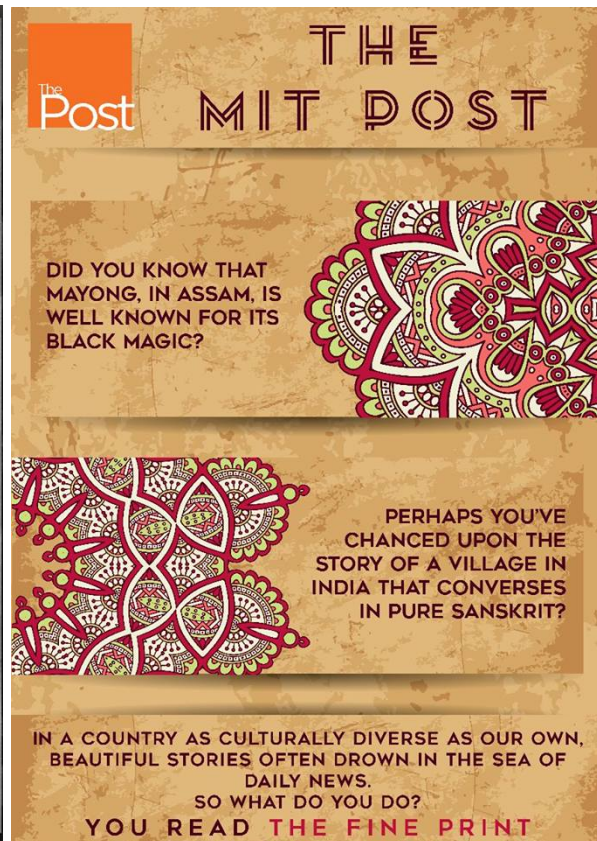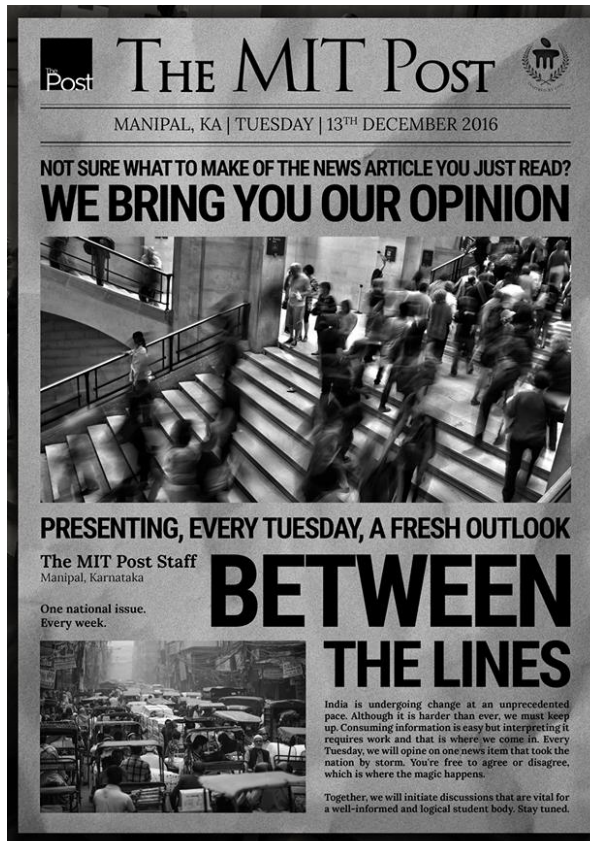
Fig 4: The posters for the weekly columns 'Between the lines' and 'Fine Print'

These columns garnered large audiences, and initiated discussion of the kind the college had never before seen, on a public forum. We were receiving undivided readership for these, which wasn't the case with articles with topics similar to those of the rival media body. The writers were excited to generate content of a kind they weren't used to, and people were coming forward with unique ideas. We took on criticizing policy decisions, giving opinions on financial matters and discussing quaint stories from remote parts of India that would otherwise have been left unsaid.

The greatest success, however, was when the rival media body came up an excellent weekly column of their own, about mental disorders. **When we weren't butting heads over mediocre content, we were capable of generating unique, quality content.**

4. Meaningful Communication in a Digital Age

"The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said."
Peter Drucker

Before I took on my role in the board, I had absolutely no qualms about texting a person. It allowed you to think about your responses, analyze them and store away conversations for later. It seemed efficient and easy. What I hadn't realized was how artificial and fabricated it could be.

When an actual conversation takes place, the exchange isn't purely verbal. In the lift of an eyebrow, in the upward tilt of the corner of the mouth, in a quick wrinkling of the forehead that instantly disappears, lies the truth of how a person feels in response to what you say. If you say something hurtful over text, you won't see the pain in the reader's eyes, before the comment is casually dismissed. Seeing 'haha' instead of a teeth baring smile can mean there never was one. There is far more to a conversation that just the actual content.

Not having to see the reaction your words invoke often leads to a perceived power to say absolutely anything. This leads to people saying regrettable things they would never say directly to another. In my time working as a board member, there have been countless misunderstandings simply due to the use of WhatsApp as a meeting place. Talking to one another and expressing viewpoints in person is significantly different from typing them out. Anger over gauged insults makes everything worse.

One of my juniors was having a hard time personally, and when questioned about something on a WhatsApp group, lost his cool. **He had misunderstood the tone of the question due to random capitalization of words.** He went off on an offensive barrage from the convenience of his home, not having to face anyone at that moment. The subsequent request for an apology, also took place on the same forum, yielding negative results. There have been fights due to differential interpretation of the meanings of certain emoticons.

Such platforms can be excellent to discuss the work to be done and its distribution among the group. However, for discussions on serious issues and policy decisions, face to face discussions are the way to go.

5. The desire for Instant Results

It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer.

Albert Einstein

Patience and perseverance are virtues that are becoming increasingly hard to stick with. The above is a sketch I made, of a little girl. To the untrained eye, it is ordinary. But ask any artist and he'll tell you how very flawed it is. The hair curls at unrealistic angles, the light doesn't follow the laws of reflection and the neck is awkward at best. What draws a viewer into this picture, are the eyes. That is because I spent the longest time on the eyes. Once they were done, the rest was a speedy process.

The maximum time I'd allotted to getting this done was three hours. I couldn't keep it aside for later. I couldn't patiently do her hair right. I just had to finish it. This is a common sentiment in the age of instagram stories and snapchat. You have to keep putting out material continuously for fear of becoming irrelevant, no matter the quality of the content.

As a media body, we have been faced with this issue more times than I'd care to admit. Do we put out substandard, hurriedly written material frequently or quality content occasionally? More often than not, we have to settle for something in-between because if not we lose readers. If we lose readers, the quality content we slave over for weeks has no one to consume it.

In a generation of instant gratification, holding out and taking things slow is an underrated challenge.

6. Conclusion

Rank does not confer privileges or give power. It imposes responsibility

Peter Drucker

At the end of a fairly turbulent stint as the Head of Reporting, I understand what Peter Drucker meant when he said this. I'd come into this experience thinking more about the privileges at my disposition than my actual responsibilities. I'd anticipated the times I'd put forward ideas, but not the times when I'd have to tell a junior to re-write his article. I hadn't planned for the times I'd have to defend my intentions in launching a particular column, over and over. I wasn't remotely prepared to tell a writer that his idea wasn't in line with the ideals of the organisation. I wasn't thinking of the times I'd have to let go of my pride and apologise. I just hadn't known.

Today, I walk away, a tiny bit wiser for having done so. I have reallised that irrespective of the impact of technology in an ever changing world, human beings have adapted in accordance to the change, yet remained strikingly similar. Similar in the fact that we want dignity. Similar in that we want a chance to showcase our abilities and rise up to our potential. Similar in the fact that we simply want to be understood.

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