

Early Years in Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

The Institute of Management at Ahmedabad is highly regarded for its achievements. It is often claimed by some people that success of IIMs is facilitated by their sponsorship and support by government. There are, however, many government supported institutions which are hardly known for their performance. There is evidence to support that the internal management practices and processes contribute to the success or inadequacy of an institution, not ownership by itself. Child rearing practices and the care that families give at different stages of growing up determine, to a large extent, the child's adjustment to the society and the people. This I believe is true also for institutions. In this chapter I would describe in brief some institutional practices that have significantly contributed to the effectiveness of IIMA.

After little over 15 years of work in senior managerial positions, I joined Indian Institute of Management in Kolkata (IIMC) in early 1963 I shifted to Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad (IIMA) after a little over four years, I left IIMA in 1973 to head the Indian Institute of Public Administration in Delhi. This chapter is based on my experience of working at IIMA for more than six years and contact with people beyond these years. Institutions do change but strengths that the system as a whole acquires often guide its development. I will arrange my comments in three sections as follows:

- (a) The Academic Activity
- (b) The Administrative Practices
- (c) An Overview

The Academic Activity

At the time IIMs were set up, some institutions provided short duration training courses in management. A few universities had started evening courses for practicing executives. Most business organisations believed that managers had to be developed on the job. A strategy to gain acceptance to formal education for management by IIMs had to take into consideration the environmental circumstance. Organisations must observe, and perhaps experience, the usefulness of an educational programme to recruit graduates in IIM's programmes, and also provide environment for them to be useful. The IIMA initiated programmes at three levels:

- General management programmes for top, senior and middle levels of management.
- Executive development programmes in functional areas.
- A long term programme of two-year duration for graduates who were seeking a career in business.

IIMA developed a three-tier programme in general management which involved the top-tier participation for one week; senior level for 2 weeks and middle level for four weeks. A company had to nominate personnel for all three tiers. Harvard Business School faculty were associated with this programme. Gradually the local faculty took over the programme.

Each academic area initiated short term functional programmes for practicing executives. The entire faculty was involved in the Post Graduate Programme (PGP)

The Institute developed a tradition of meticulous planning for each of the programmes. For example, the programme director for the 3 tier programme for the next year was announced soon after the completion of the programme. The faculty for the programme was also identified and the programme director alongwith the faculty held several meetings throughout the two year work on all aspects of the programme: the brochure, the admission criteria, the course content, the teaching technology, the teaching material, etc. The faculty chosen for the course was selected on the basis of their reputation as a teacher. Individuals who were invited to teach in the programme considered this as an honour.

The functional programmes and the PGP required several stages of planning and review before the programme was ready to launch. By and large the faculty accepted the careful preparation of a programme as an essential requirement for launching it. This process was further strengthened

because the instructor had to prepare the course outline stating the objective of the course, relevant cases and teaching material and the evaluation scheme.

Teaching Methodology

IIMA took full advantage of its collaboration with Harvard Business School. Every member of the faculty recruited in early stages was required to attend a one-year International Teacher's Programme at Harvard Business School. This participation helped the institute in many ways. More significantly it helped in three ways: (a) to evolve a philosophy of student centered education in management programmes; (b) closer social relationships among faculty members for being participants in the programme, (c) imbibing case method of teaching. All faculty members were required to write cases which were included in the annual review of work of the faculty. The faculty held almost weekly case meetings to discuss new cases and review progress in case writing. Some of these practices were however discontinued after first six or seven years.

Most members of the faculty followed the practices that I have mentioned here in this note. However some faculty members strongly believed in the case teaching methodology and some others followed the practices as routine because they were required to do so; yet others saw little sense in these practices. There were repeated discussions on the unsuitability of case method for some courses, although such discussions did not lead to any policy decisions. A few members of the faculty, on their own, began to use other teaching methods than case-method. The writing of new cases reduced as the teaching methods were left to individual choice.

In brief, the practices developed in respect to course planning, teaching methodology, rigour, etc. ensured the quality of teaching. Students also made demands on the faculty because they were involved in the preparation of cases as class assignments. They were free to question their grades if they felt dissatisfied with it. The teachers had to deal with the situation as occasionally complaints were brought to the Faculty Committee but most issues were resolved by the faculty member concerned, or the PGP committee. Irrespective of whatever changes happened in the Institute, the PGP teaching followed the practices established for preparation and teaching. Most academic matters were discussed in Faculty Meeting and operational aspects were handled by either PGP committee members or the individual faculty. I cannot recall any occasion when academic matters were taken up by the director. He was consulted at the discretion of the faculty member but rarely involved in operating matters.

The Administrative Practices

In all academic matters the Faculty Meeting was seen to be and was treated as, the decision making body. The faculty as a whole was concerned with all aspects of the Post Graduate Programme(PGP), from admission to graduation. All major activities such as admission, academic programme including grading, disciplinary matters, placement etc. were discussed in the Faculty Meeting. For each activity, a committee of faculty members existing which brought to the Faculty Meeting any policy issues. Within the parameters set out for each activity, the concerned committee carried out all required activities. I cannot recall any occasion when the director changed or overruled a decision taken in the Faculty Meeting, these decision were also taken by consensus. There was no voting on issues. Often discussions were time-consuming and many members thought that these meetings were a waste of time but, in retrospect, I believe that the policy of consensus decision making prevented factionalism among the faculty and brought a certain degree of objectivity in examination of issues.

The academic areas were headed by area chairman. They were responsible for planning of courses, executive development programmes, knowledge upgradation for the area members and scouting for new faculty. The area chairman had no authority over the members, nor a budget. The philosophy of persuasion and consensus building was encouraged. Many of the area chairmen had difficulty in performing these tasks but, in retrospect, I believe that this style of functioning gave strength to the system. As many of the faculty members were in touch with people in other institutions, and met individuals in meetings and conferences, the scouting for new faculty became easier for the institution.

The most dominant characteristic of the institutional achievement was its peer culture. The entire system gave confidence to individuals, and a strong sense of belonging to the institution. One expression of this feeling was that most faculty observed the decisions taken by the Faculty Meeting. No one cut classes or delayed in submitting grades, or violated any other norms relating to academic work.

Faculty Development

In the early years, new faculty spent some time in the field for case writing before they took up teaching assignments. Some newcomers also sat through some of the classes during the initiation period. It was area chairman's responsibility to help the newcomer adjust to the system. However, some of these practices were not always followed after the initial 5-7 years.

Faculty evaluation was carried out by the director. As in many other institutions, some decisions were seen to be unfair by a number of people, director set up a Committee of four persons including himself to undertake assessment of the faculty. The individual member of the faculty filled up in the prescribed form the work done during the year and his plans for the year to come. He had to enclose all his written output with the performance. The Assessment Committee read the material individually. When in doubt, the material was sent to outside experts to evaluate. Each individual plan was discussed by the Committee and a decision on the quality of performance for the previous years and guidelines for the development were given. All decisions by the committee had to be unanimous. At times individual cases were discussed for a whole day or more to reach a unanimous decision. Detailed justification had to be articulated by the members in case of agreement or disagreement. The decision so reached was discussed by the director with the individual faculty. By and large the system was well accepted by the teaching community.

An Overview

Some of the practices that are identified in this chapter are also practiced in other institutions. What, in specific terms, has contributed to the institutional stability or why have some practices been sustained over a period of nearly forty years? I am sure that IIMA of the 1960s is not the same in the 1990s. However the spirit of the academic programmes and the academic activity remains basically unchanged. For example, the Institute has taken nearly two years of preparation to launch an executive MBA programme. The meticulous planning and developing a package with serious contribution of the teachers towards the programme has continued. Faculty consultation system and the structures have continued in substance and not only in form. The style of functioning may vary from one director to another but the active role of the faculty in academic matters continues to prevail. I believe that the systems have been sustained because the Faculty Meeting has performed the decision making role. The autonomy and responsibility given to faculty has provided continuity. The director may change, as it has done at IIMA, but the faculty role has not been affected by this change. The public acclaim of the Institute has reinforced and ensured continuity of the system. The change of guard at the Institute may bring about and influence other aspects such as public contact, projects, research, etc. but not the PGP or related academic activities.

Convictions of the institutional leader in an academic setting are important. This requirement is critical in an academic setting because the faculty members operate as 'individuals' in their central task of teaching, research and publications. In performing these tasks, they either wholly reflect their own convictions or something that the institutional environment promotes. The institutional leadership has an important responsibility in encouraging such an environment. Ravi Mathai, the first full time director of the Institute, believed that the institution would be as strong as its faculty. The faculty must have respect for themselves and confidence in their abilities. These characteristics would develop by taking responsibility for the task in which they were engaged. Through this process they are likely to develop feeling of belongingness to the institution and acceptance as an important member of the community. To be successful people have to be tolerant of diversity, different ways of behaviour. While performing institutional tasks members should have to arrive at decisions that are broadly acceptable to all. They must develop norms to guide the activity and ways of dealing with deviant behaviour. These sentiments would develop only when the members work together on tasks that they share. The committee structure and emphasis on consensus building rather than voting on issues could contribute to institutional culture building. Ravi Mathai did not articulate these ideas, nor am I sure that he initiated the systems described here with total clarity in his mind. I am however sure that he had strong faith in developing peer level decision systems. I have tried to set down these assumptions derived from the experience of the system. All of us, in various positions, had to function by persuasion rather than authority of the position. This style of working in committees had another advantages: The community was able to avoid 'power-centers' behind whose shadow other members of the community could take shelter. This practices prevented factions within the community. Many individuals often felt frustrated with the system, but in retrospect, I believe that the style of functioning in early years gave the system strength and stability.

The Review System

IIMA's academic planning systems were briefly described earlier. The Institute also built review mechanisms to know how well things were being done. The courses were reviewed after every term. A Review Committee was set up in 1971 to recommend on all aspects of work and future directions. I chaired this committee and we held discussions/consultations with faculty members and outsiders. Our report was discussed in the Faculty Meeting for nearly three days. Such committees were appointed after every ten years.

I have mentioned in brief some of the administrative practices that I believe provided a strong foundation to the institution. Notwithstanding the systems, many faculty members felt that the institution lacked direction—that the institution was drifting, that their time was being taken away by meetings which produce little, that something must be done to improve things. At one stage A K Rice was invited to consult with the institution but his recommendations were not taken up for discussion. Like most other institutions, some individuals worked harder than others; some carried more responsibility; some people grumbled about one thing or another; some individuals criticised everything that happened, and so on. Notwithstanding such responses, the systems that operated and practices that were encouraged at the Institute gave it a strong basis. The differences among faculty members existed as they do in many institutions. Some people talked poorly behind the back of other people. Most differences were resolved among the institutional members and by mediation of others. Such matters did not adversely influence academic activities or decision making processes. However, at no time that I can recall anyone took academic activities less seriously. I believe that early foundation has contributed to the Institute's development. Institutions, like people, mature with experience but they need careful nurturing. In many institutions one hears that people matter. However in many places this remains what I have called elsewhere 'a statement of intent'. This notion acquires meaning when this sentiment is reflected in the way in which the institution arranges its work. IIMA gave meaning to this intent in the way I have discussed in this chapter.

