

Sleepless in Atlanta

Lesson in Crisis Management...

At the dawn of every organization, there often is one unique employee who joins in as a fresher and goes on to become a legendary veteran. Cybage had a good fortune of one such fine professional in Mahesh GB, the first Cybagian of our shaping years! But this story is not about Mahesh's meteoric 'flight' from fresher to chief architect, rather his contribution on the 'ground'—the corporate lesson in crisis management he taught Cybage in his overly simplified way. I will attempt to immortalize below that sleepless night in Atlanta with Mahesh that ended up leaving an eternal impression on me...

1998—the year when I decided to have Mahesh GB accompany me on one of my US marketing trips. One of the first cities we visited during our trip was Atlanta. Upon disembarking from the flight, we encountered an abnormally overcrowded terminal swarming with human bodies! We navigated our way to the car rental counter, and were snubbed off by the agent—he claimed that our booking didn't exist in the system! Unfortunately, the confirmation number was in the laptop, which was completely discharged. We searched through the crowd for laptop charging points in the terminal, and then managed to pull out the rental confirmation. The agent then had no choice but to honor the reservation.

I drove out of the airport with Mahesh, and started making way through unusually heavy traffic in the direction of our appointment next day. With no prior reservation, I resorted to the primitive approach of driving closer toward our destination and hunting for budget lodging in the vicinity. Now on this particular day, we couldn't find a vacancy in any of the hotels near our place of appointment. So, we started making bigger and bigger peripheral drive around our destination. Pretty soon our dismay turned into horror as we discovered that every single hotel we came across was overbooked! The next four hours were straight out of a comical episode—the driver incessantly muttering abuses; the passenger sitting with the most peaceful expression on his face! We agonizingly continued this ordeal until we had driven almost 50 miles away from the city, and still there was no sign of vacancies in motels that were scattered in the wilderness! I was convinced that we had been magically transported to a science fiction movie where the whole world out there was in pretense mode, out and out to scheme against Arun Nathani and Mahesh GB! (Later we discovered there was a severe typhoon warning in the neighboring state of North Carolina that had resulted in mass hysteria and exodus into the state of Georgia.)

Resigned, we drove back downtown to be closer to our next day's appointment, parked our car on the side street of one of the downtown hotels, reclined the seats as far as our budget car would allow, and then tried to sleep. Every now and then, a set of huge guys in all sizes and colors walked past the pathway! My heart was in my mouth and I just couldn't bring myself to close my eyes. Still, like a model CEO, I put up a brave face and glanced over to Mahesh to extend moral support. And what do I find?—our Mahesh GB is happily relishing the view of twinkling stars through the windshield, the same relaxed expression on his face that had stayed with him over the last few hours! So cool and chilled, he dozed off to snoring zone in no time! A good portion of the night I kept staring at this guy, trying to comprehend how any normal human

being can be so immune to the trauma around him? In the morning, we went to the nearest McDonalds to freshen up in their restroom and went for our appointment. Needless to add, a sleepless night of disorientation and disheveled looks didn't help in capturing that client!

But what Cybage got in the bargain was an invaluable lesson in crisis management! When you run any business, there will be times when things will just go frustratingly wrong on a continual basis. Those are the testing times for a true CXO—how cool one can remain when all hell breaks loose. Perhaps if I had managed to keep my cool, slept well on that fateful Atlanta night, gone to my appointment all relaxed—jovial with an amusing story about the hardships to make it to the meeting—who knows, maybe we would have captured that client?

Under normal circumstances, one would have to pay a bomb for this management lesson to sink in. Cybage got it free! Courtesy Mahesh GB, who about a year back finally bid adieu to Cybage to pursue his entrepreneurial ambitions. While Cybage is deprived of his physical proximity, I often fall back on 'sleepless in Atlanta' memories when my back is against the wall in any corporate crisis situation—it brings back a smile, and the predicament suddenly assumes an objective stimulating flavor 😊