

Insider Perspective: Memories & lessons from ZOO: Doing well for the World Ateeq Ahmad*

It has been 15 years since the wonderful two months I spent living and working at Zoo Outreach Organisation. "Big Boss" (my name for Sally Walker) now approached me to write about my time with her and the Z.O.O. team on occasion of ZOO's 25th year. It is an enormous privilege and honor for me.

I often wonder what would my life have been like if I hadn't opened up the Economic Times one fine morning to see a small blurb about Zoo Outreach Organization. If I had not written to Ms. Walker asking for two months of training as part of my M.B.A. program from Aligarh Muslim University, I would not have had such an exposure to a strong work culture and spirit of entrepreneurship.

Why did someone in an M.B.A. program want to work in Zoo Outreach Organization, you might wonder? Well, it had to do with my father's penchant for volunteering his evenings at various charitable organizations, my genuine interest in wildlife conservation and a couple of books, one by Peter Drucker titled "Managing the Nonprofit Organization" and the other by Philip Kotler titled "Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations". The Gurus were saying that business professionals had much to learn from the strong ethical missions of non-profit businesses and also had much to teach nonprofits about the principles of marketing and management. So I decided that I had to give this "new frontier" a try.

Needless to say, the books are hard to emulate in actual practice. I landed, was bowled over, and completely overwhelmed with my two months of experiences in Zoo Outreach Organization. Many times, I have felt that while I got to learn a lot from them, I didn't really say "thank you" properly. These few points that I put together as learning which began with my time with this wonderful organization and continued on, are a way of conveying my heartfelt gratitude for teaching me so much at the formative period of my career.

Management Principles in the Work of Ateeq Ahmed

1. Work like you own it and have passion for what you do. The days of working only for money are over. Of course, no one works only for self-actualization all the time, but when your hair is graying and the bones start creaking, you need to have a story of achievement where you did well for the world, besides making a boatload of gold, of course.

2. Busy work is meditation by another name. The way to bigger roles is through executing bit parts in projects well. So don't reject the small stuff. It is not an obstacle to cut through, but a river to swim across, with grace and growing ease as you gain expertise in your own domain.

3. Mastery over something takes a lot of time, spend it learning and don't get frustrated too easily.

We see too many people in a hurry... to get promoted, to have a higher position quickly in life, etc.. The results of short-term thinking at the expense of long term benefits are evident in the Wall Street crash of last year.



4. Make sure that you communicate all your ideas, however stupid they might appear. An organization benefits more if ideas bubble within it from all sorts of sources. Be relentless about new ideas. Go looking for new pastures. Try to drum up new business; don't sit around waiting to be told what to do. I didn't do this at Z.O.O. because I was scared of derision and a bit timid. However, I learnt over time that scorn over a new idea is a cynic's game. And what have cynics ever done in life?

5. Original thinkers often make the big mistakes. Make more of them. Write stuff down and take positions in terms of business strategy. You will be wrong often, but you will be recognized as someone who has valid opinions. Always be reading, watching your mentors and peers, and taking continuing education credits. It will broaden your perspectives and make your mind more assimilative of change.

6. Micromanagers are not bad; their expectations just need to be managed and their trust needs to be built up. Don't get cowed by reputations either. Those who are good can handle criticism, those who are not; you do not want to work with. You can always find a more fulfilling gig.

7. Always, maintain integrity and honesty. When in doubt do what your conscience says, no matter what benefits you might lose. Make sure that is clear. Once that is lost in a relationship, you cannot repair it. My failing here has been in trying to be liked too much, instead of stating plain facts. I have improved over time but I learnt the hard way.

8. Always know that there is someone more gifted and brighter than you in this world. That will teach you a bit of modesty. Do not overrate yourself but more importantly don't underestimate your capabilities either. Don't take crap about your commitment

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to your work. Some people will tend to be bullies. They need to understand that you will not roll over to their point of view.

9. When all doors close, turn around and take a new road. I dearly wanted to work in marketing for wildlife conservation but I could not get a job in any of the 70 major zoos in the USA that I applied. So, I chose to take a new path, less admirable but still something that interested me very much. However, I keep coming back to this closed door. I volunteered at the LA Zoo, and now am compiling a list of all known mammals on a website that my wife and I put together. I am knocking again at that door that closed on me but this time, from another angle. Dreams can be re-molded and re-made.

10. All business is local. Enjoy the different people and cultures you find yourself in. I was completely new to everything Tamil but I loved Coimbatore. I had wonderful dosas (the likes of which I have never tasted since); I had idli and coffee for breakfast; trekked up Maruthamalai; enjoyed a Rajnikanth movie (who cares about understanding dialog!); and I wear lungis at home even today.

11. Make time to create small rewards for yourself, just for being. It is immensely relaxing to have some "kaafi" in the morning and some "paan" with your lunch. These are just ways to let your mind rest at ease before you go again into the fray.

12. Try to stay out of office politics. You will lose in the short-term if you don't toot your own horn but gains in the longer-term are guaranteed. Let your work speak for you. However, this does not mean that you seclude yourself from office friends. Do build networks of people you care about and work with them towards common goals.

There is little of this that I really was able to achieve, if anything, when I was with Zoo Outreach Organization. However, many of these points have come to mind over the course of these years, reflecting on those halcyon days.

Even now I struggle with many of these lessons of life but one always has more to learn. A person goes through myriad transformations in his/her life, and at some later date, I may laugh at some of these, perhaps puerile notions. For now, though, these encapsulate 15 years of learning that began at Zoo Outreach Organization.

Z.O.O. ROCKS!!! Ateeq Ahmed

MY TURN ! (by Big Boss!)

Ateeq Ahamed, as he said, wrote to us and volunteered as an intern at Z.O.O. to fulfill his requirement at A.M.U. I was very suspicious of him at first because I couldn't imagine how our organisation and his M.B.A. requirement could possibly meet. He landed in Coimbatore, a North Indian to the tips of his toes and

looking suspiciously like one of the "Freek Brothers" comic books of hippie days - wild hair, skinny as a noodle, totally unkempt looking no matter what he put on, and always with a wild, questioning expression!

Honestly I can't remember much about his work except the super bloopers which took place occasionally. The mini-bloopers were daily of course! I think I might have turned Ateeq over to Sanjay and that's why I don't remember much. Or maybe it was trauma! Actually I really liked Ateeq a lot ... he made me laugh, but I couldn't admit it. I was afraid he would become even more of a wild man. And truth be known, I enjoy playing the mean old woman big boss, acting stern while shaking with laughter at Ateeq's antics. Two incidents I remember very well. One occurred when Ateeq had some work to do for me and I walked into his work space to see how it was going and he was deep in conversation with some gorgeous young babe who was visiting our office. I said "Ahhh teeq!" and he flew up about 2 feet in the air (from a sitting position) like a jumping rat. I was always catching him doing something ... it became a big joke in our office. We had to teach Ateeq how to operate a computer of course and he always wanted to go to the next lesson. One day Ateeq erased an entire hard disk by typing Control Alt Delete. This mistake was so horrible it defied appropriate reaction. Sanjay thought it was hilarious and teased Ateeq till his last day at our office, nicknaming him "Control Alt Delete".

Ateeq lived in the office in a small room we used as a sort of Library. Latha, our finance and admin wizard worked in the next room and used to stay late. She said that Ateeq to read all the books from the library during the night time and early morning he would go into a very deep sleep. Once she had get help from our neighbors to wake him up and it took nearly 2 hours! She remembers that he used to talk too much and one day she saw that I got very angry as he and Gunashekar were talking continuously. She said I told him ZOO had been created with very hard work and I didn't want him to spoil the behaviour of our staff. She said he took it very positively and apologized for his behaviour. I don't remember this unfortunately but it sounds like both of us.

Ateeq and I have been in touch occasionally but I had to search the web to find and ask him to do the employee "Insider Perspective" for the month. When I searched for him on the Web I was amazed at all he had done with his life ... he was all over the web with site of his own and a big post at an impressive company. Now I hear from him that he is still trying for a zoo job. If I could afford him, I would get him back in my office! He kept us in good humour, was honest and sincere as well as very very smart.

ATEEQ ROCKS! Sally Walker (Big Boss).