

# Workplace ostracism, complacency and career plateau – impediment in the career path of a dignified clerk

Santosh Basavaraj and Rekha Hitha Aranha

## Introduction

Savaria Limited is an automation based engineering company located in Hyderabad, Telangana, India. The company operates in a competitive environment, despite all the odds, the company sustained competition in the severe economic slowdown during 2008–2009. Tomy had spent his entire working life at Savaria Limited. In total he worked for 19 years. He was perceived as a trouble-shooter for project-related issues in the company. He started his career in Savaria Limited as a Graduate Engineer Trainee (GET) in 1999 and rose to the rank of Assistant Manager. Contrary to this, the recent performance appraisals ratings made him worried, and he was probing for the reason for his low performance. His scores in the past five-year assessment gradually declined despite taking ten training sessions and three performance improvement plans (PIP).

Year-on-year, his ratings were going down; he was unable to figure out the reason for this decline. He was with the company through its thick and thin and was part of several milestone projects during his tenure. During his tenure with Savaria Limited, he witnessed many managers leaving the company who worked for a short stint, but their exits never discouraged him from putting his best efforts. On the other hand, his co-workers say that he gets so engrossed in his work, that he ignored the long-term future of his job. For the last five years, he was feeling ostracised at work, which made him feel upset as he was not appreciated and recognized. Tomy was unable to understand his present state that was affecting his productivity.

## Savaria Limited's market and financial performance

Savaria Limited is an engineering-based company headquartered at Hyderabad, operating in India and overseas. The company is having its operations in five business verticals, namely, thermal power machinery for the central government, factory automation, engineering construction and healthcare equipment. In the year 2007–2008, the company touched 100 crores (US\$22,983,222.25 @ \$43.51 in 2008) turnover from five business verticals. The factory automation division witnessed tremendous growth in sales until 2007; this was due to the automation transition phase of many fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), automobile and machine tool companies. The demand for automation started declining from 2007 onwards; hence, the workforce requirement for automation also decreased. Subsequently, the sales in automation and thermal division started declining, whereas other business verticals such as space, healthcare and engineering businesses were having good sales. The company witnessed a growth rate of 5%–6% in the thermal

Santosh Basavaraj and Rekha Hitha Aranha both are based at the School of Business and Management, Christ University, Bangalore, India.

Disclaimer. This case is written solely for educational purposes and is not intended to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making. The authors may have disguised names; financial and other recognizable information to protect confidentiality.

power division with projects in the pipeline for the next few years. The sales of Savaria Limited depended on the Central Government orders and investments. Though the sales figures for the last five years seem to be appealing, the company lost many of its government projects to its competitors.

### **Savaria Limited's human resource and personnel**

For the year 2018–2019, the staff strength was around 800 employees from five different verticals all over India. Out of which, 450 employees were on company roll, 200 contract workers working in four factories in Hyderabad. The remaining 150 employees were from the sales team working at various branches in India and abroad.

The HR team at Corporate office in Hyderabad was having five members, namely, one HR Manager, two Assistant Managers and two executives. The HR department partners in the formulation of strategies related to human resources in the organization. The HR department was managing the employee's end-to-end HR operations. The attrition rate was close to 15%, which was considered high amongst its competitors and the industry. The constant entry and exit of people affected the company's productivity, targets and deadlines.

### **Savaria Limited's strategy to cope with macro-environment conditions**

The company was struggling to sustain in the market. The setback of the global economic slowdown between 2008–2009 damaged its growth. Manish Savaria, Chief Managing Director (also referred to as CMD), took various initiatives for the smooth functioning operations.

The company had a total workforce of 1,000 employees during 2008–2009. CMD realized that the employee strength was too large to manage the company to going forward; the CMD initiated the process of right-sizing to bring the workforce strength to 800 employees. HR Manager, Vijay Kamalesh, took this responsibility. The process of right-sizing was phased in several stages. Vijay managed the transition beyond the expectations of the CMD in eight months. Employees who were on-roll categorized as superior performers, average performers and underperformers. The underperformers were either placed in different departments that matched their skill sets or kept on notice period. During Vijay's tenure, many HR initiatives were taken up, to name a few: ISO 9001:2008 implementation, environment management systems OSHAS 18000, ISO 14001 and AS 9100 certifications.

### **Career planning framework at Savaria Limited**

The career path (Please refer to [Exhibit 1](#)) was defined and handed over to newly joined employees during the onboarding process. The employees were made clear about their career progress in Savaria Limited, and hardly any complaints regarding their growth in the company were raised. As mentioned in [Exhibit 1](#), each employee was allotted a specific departments. The details of career movement was also mentioned in the appointment letter of the employee.

The education qualifications required for each position stated in [Exhibit 1](#), and the upward movement was possible only when a satisfactory level of performance appraisal ratings were reached. During the annual appraisal meeting, overall aggregate points were allotted to the employee to move to the next level of designation. Both the superior and subordinates were informed about the growth path in the organization. The career planning system included education qualification, appraisal ratings, experience on the job and output achieved as the next level of designation. There was a separate section in the appraisal form which was capturing this input. The HR Managers were held responsible to collect the information and report the employees' career-related score in the appraisal format. The career planning framework was having career anchors (fixers, attachers) that

indicate individual orientation toward the job, priority and values. Anchors are competencies, motives and value associated with career choice (Schein, 1985). The individuals were assessed on some of the anchors suggested by Schein (1985) such as technical competences (hard skills), managerial competencies (problem-solving, emotional), autonomy (freedom to perform), security (risk-taking ability), entrepreneurship (ownership) and challenging roles.

Also, the succession planning process was introduced by Vijay to identify talents for future positions. Further to the declining sales, the management decided to move the automation division employees to other verticals.

### **Pandora's box**

Things started getting worse when people from the HR department started leaving the company for the greener pastures. Vijay Kamalesh, Manager HR parted his way in 2014 and was succeeded by Nandeesh, as new Manager HR. Nandeesh got enthralled with the work of his predecessor Vijay. On March 25, 2015, Nandeesh happened to meet an employee Tomy, who was visibly upset and was loggerheads with his colleagues. Appallingly, Tomy asked Nandeesh about his credentials. Nandeesh did not feel good about answering this question, and he thought that the issue is like someone asking, where is my home? Tomy looked lost in the workplace, and it was evident that he had no role clarity about his role.

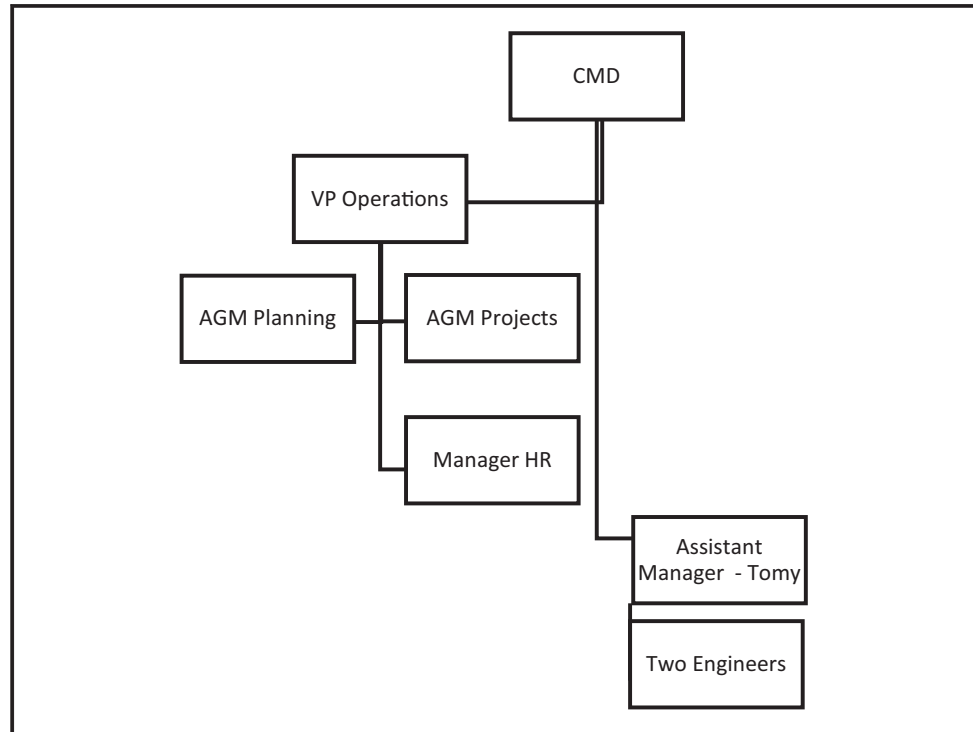
Nandeesh requested Tomy to meet him in the HR department after his work. During the meeting in the evening, Tomy expressed his dissatisfaction over the past five years of his appraisal. Three sessions of formal performance counselling carried out during this period by a senior executive, CMD and HR Manager added little to alter his performance. He also explained about the performance improvement plan (PIP) and ten training program that added no value to enhance his capabilities. As per the HR Training policy, the employee needs to complete a minimum of four training programs per year, out of which two organization-wide training and two individual training sessions.

Organization-wide training includes safety training, ISO 9001 training, six-sigma training, etc. Tomy was eligible to attend all these programs, and the CMD recommended these programs for him and HR included them in his training need analysis (TNA) form. For Tomy, the HR department provided technical training sessions such as on-line course on SAP and external trainer driven Project management software training and CATIA V5. Outbound behavioral training (OBT) on teamwork, interpersonal skills, empathy, negotiation skills and challenges handling training were given to Tomy. He attended all the training sessions that were allotted in his name and also participated in the performance improvement sessions. Somehow, Tomy was unable to comprehend the importance of these training programs for his career development.

Few colleagues shared their concern that Tomy has stuck himself in his past glory and is incompetent to apply the content of the training program to his job. His withdrawal behavior was evident by his attitude and the application of the transfer of training content to the job. The supervisor of Tomy was CMD, and he was frequently updating the status of all projects directly to CMD. He claimed that management needs to consider his years of experience, and he deserves better treatment in terms of his appraisals and recognition.

Tomy took pride in boasting his series of achievements in the organization, and it starts from his hiring decision to-date achievements. During his joining time, two departments were responsible for project delivery; first, the planning department that was responsible for the project planning (Figure 1). Second, the operations department that was responsible for executing the projects. The managers of these departments were interacting to complete the projects. Both the departmental heads understood that one person was required to coordinate the activities between the departments.

**Figure 1** Board/organization structure



After a manpower need analysis, the two departmental heads proposed a recruitment request to CMD for the approval, and CMD approved the same. Accordingly, HR initiated the recruitment process to hire a fresh graduate. In this context, Tomy was appointed to coordinate the activities among the two departments. As time passed, he continued to perform his responsibility, but both the departments never considered Tomy as a member of their teams.

When the workload of projects increased, Tomy felt he needs few more hands to take care of the work, and two new engineers joined him for the coordination activity. Specific roles and responsibilities were not available for this team other than the coordination between the departments. With more people in the support role and no proper reporting structure for this small team, a lot of confusion, stress and frustration prevailed among these trios. Their time and effort was spent on coordination of the substantial workload. This situation lasted for several years. Tomy continued to do the work assigned by both the departments, most of his time was spent on in solving implementation issues. Many activities he performed were on fire fighting mode. Tomy was the preferred trouble-shooter for many critical problems; both the departments appreciated him.

The company started an initiative of moving to information technology (IT) enabled processes and systems; its dependence on technology increased in many-folds. The traditional ERP software was replaced by systems, applications and products (SAP) software in the year 2009–2010. This platform was brought to integrated various activities of the department. Tomy was instrumental in this transition phase; he supported the technical team to provide an in-depth understanding of the multiple processes and transactions among the departments. The changed situation brought new challenges to his job, Tomy extended his support and co-operation in integrating the activity of these two departments. The radical transformation in technology and dependency on software made the

coordination among the department easier, and now both the department realized that they could manage their work without Tomy.

After some time, Tomy's job become obsolete.

Tomy and his team were assigned more clerical jobs as a new way of working.

In the changed context, HR Manager did a thorough workforce planning to clarify the positional requirements for the overall company through job descriptions available.

The two employees who were reporting to Tomy moved to project planning and operations departments based on their skill sets. Moving two employees was easy because of their less experienced and the department heads also accepted them. However, no changes were made in the Job description or restructuring to Tomy's job.

However, the earlier HR manager (Vijay Kamlesh) overlooked to address this issue during his tenure. Vijay Kamlesh got occupied with many new initiatives such as ISO 9001, AS9100, etc.

The status quo with Tomy and his job description was maintained for the next two years, Tomy continued to follow the protocol as per the work allocated. Since Tomy was reporting to CMD and was occupied with many project assignments, Vijay Kamlesh maintained the status quo.

With this *status quo*, Tomy's job became more clerical, and no changes were made to his work. This somehow went unnoticed by the HR Manager and no review of his career was done. The co-workers of Tomy shared that he had a feeling of being ostracised and showed undesirable emotions during his interactions with both the departments. Somehow, the HR manager missed out to design right career planning for Tomy and his reporting superior was also did not notice it.

At the end, Tomy felt that his career stuck up at the Assistant Manager level for eleven years.

According to Tomy he was engaged and committed and had dedicated his entire working life to the organization. He had even compromised with the technological transition and the changes that brought into his work, with no resistance toward the forces that brought in radical changes in the role and structure.

Meanwhile, the company was expanding and updating its technology. The business environment changed in the past three years; many new updates came to SAP software as well; also, a new set of software was available in the company.

Tomy made little efforts to understand and upskill himself; colleagues noticed that he was still living in his past glory. Tomy was cloaked in his memories, and he was sharing his contribution to the growth of the company. His talk became routine and monotonous to the people around him. Now, there were hardly any takers for his stories because of this he felt his colleagues were neglecting him. Many employees felt, Tomy was not adding any value to the organization and was being a spoke in the wheel. In due course, many complaints were received against Tomy, and his performance fell below the standards as he could not keep himself abreast of the changing times and requirements of the organization.

With no coordination activity, Tomy's job was obsolete as per the CMD. In the advanced reporting systems, business processes could run without human intervention in terms of reporting to CMD, which was Tomy's predominant role earlier. The processes got stabilized, and most of the work was now running hazzle-free, with employees having adequate skills and qualifications to conduct the operations.

The CMD of the company now felt that Tomy was no longer needed in the new system and asked Nandeesh to communicate the same to Tomy.

Nandeesh, the HR Manager, felt that Tomy was a sincere and committed employee who had given his best before the transition of the company, which was worth considering. Nandeesh gave a thought on what CMD had communicated to him and planned to have a detailed meeting with the CMD. Before the meeting, he decided to redesign the job that Tomy did, which would convince CMD to retain Tomy. Nandeesh created a timeline for Tomy to indicate his career movement and his significant milestones in the company ([Exhibit 2](#)).

Nandeesh recollected that for last three years he was making efforts to enhance the performance of Tomy. Nandeesh was convinced that his past contribution and long-term tenure was the reason for being patient with Tomy. His predecessor also made an effort to enhance the performance of Tomy.

Some of the proposed strategies for Tomy's retention as follows:

- Create a new separate department with specific roles and responsibilities.
- Set the time-bound targets in terms of KRA and KPIs.
- Make Tomy report to the planning/projects department.
- Considering Tomy's tenure make him responsible for the new project initiatives.
- Use him as an internal trainer.

Nandeesh reviewed the different departments and made a workforce requirement analysis as well. He found a position vacant in the marketing department. He thought of repositioning Tomy with adequate training to start his new job in the marketing department. He also believed that, with up-skilling, Tomy could handle the marketing department responsibility. As Tomy was familiar with the culture, system and business of the organization, he could adjust himself in the marketing department. Nandeesh believed that acquiring new knowledge and skills will not be difficult for Tomy, as he has served for two decades in the company. Nandeesh assumed that the new role and responsibility will bring positive energy to Tomy.

However, the appraisal record for the past few years was abysmal, and it was challenging to guard Tomy. The second option was to provide six months' notice period with the outplacement facility. Third, Nandeesh prepared the possibility of getting the post of Director in the sub-vendor of Savaria Limited. He was interacting with many sub-vendors, such small vendor companies were contacting him for their business. Nandeesh prepared himself with options before he could meet the CMD regarding the issue in hand. Even with thorough preparation, Nandeesh was skeptical about receiving positive response from the CMD regarding Tomy's retention.

According to CMD he was the least contributing individual in the company. No one was favoring Tomy; despite these matters, Nandeesh decided to meet the CMD with the positive hope to request him to rethink his decision to terminate Tomy.

During the meeting, CMD told Nandeesh about the mismatch in terms of pay and the contributions made by Tomy, and he said the technological advancements in processes had made his post and role redundant. CMD called Tomy as a "Dignified Clerk." He weighed all the options presented before him and finally instructed Nandeesh to inform Tomy to leave the company with the notice period of six months.

Tomy searched job for the next six months in vain and later left the organization. After four months of leaving the company, he found a job that did not match his experience and pay expectations. Tomy started wondering about his tenure at Savaria Limited and was reflecting on his work and skill-sets and was trying hard to come to terms that he was no longer needed by the organisation that he served for two decades.

He was thinking about his actions and decisions that led him to this situation.

**Keywords:**

Career development/  
promotion,  
Human resource  
management,  
Organizational behavior,  
Performance  
measurement/metrics

Exhibit 1. Career path at Savaria Limited (approximated as per HR policy)

Figure E1

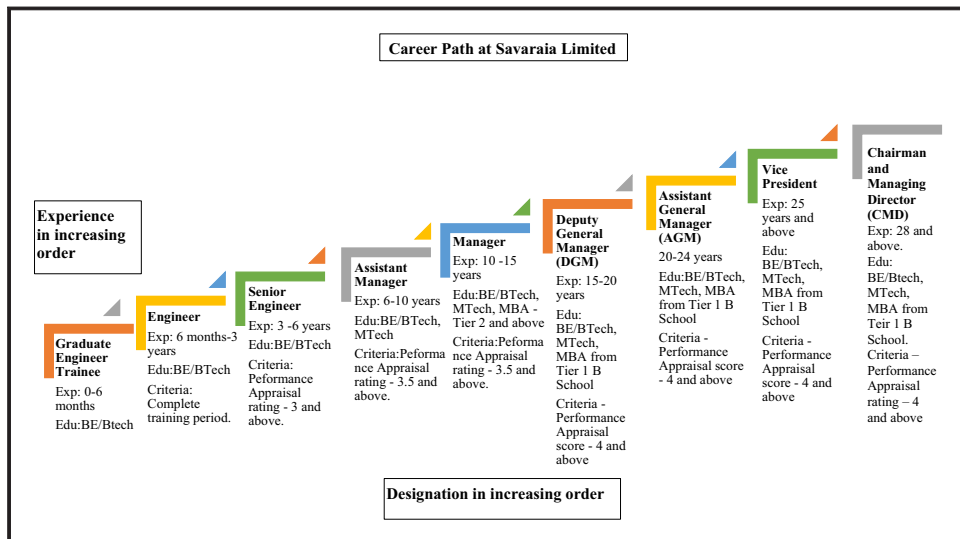
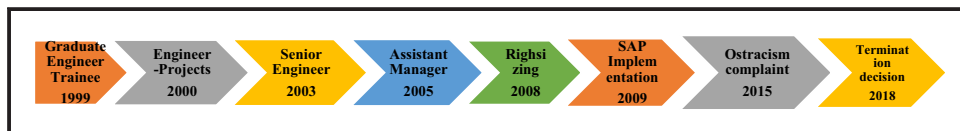


Exhibit 2. Tomy's timeline at Savaria Limited

Figure E2



## Acronyms

Aerospace Standard	AS 9100
Chief Managing Director	CMD
Computer-Aided Three-Dimensional Interactive Application	CATIA
Fast-Moving Consumer Goods	FMCG
Graduate Engineer Trainee	GET
Human Capital Management	HCM
Human Resources	HR
Information Technology	IT
International organization for standards	ISO 14001
Key performance Indicators	KPIs
Key Result Areas	KRA
Occupational safety Health and	OSHAS 18000
Outbound Behavioral Training	OBT
Performance Appraisal rating	PA
Performance Improvement Planning	PIP
Systems, Applications and Products	SAP
Training Need Analysis	TNA

## Corresponding author

Santosh Basavaraj can be contacted at: [santoshbasavaraj299@gmail.com](mailto:santoshbasavaraj299@gmail.com)