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I just got fired!

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I Just Got Fired!

Posted by Nirmalya Kumar on November 5, 2016

<https://nirmalyakumar.com/2016/11/05/i-just-got-fired/>

*“Calling all the people here to see the show
Calling for my demons now to let me go
I need something, give me something wonderful”*

As someone who almost opted to become a professional DJ, it's fortunate that my favourite song of this year is Love and Hate by Michael Kiwanuka, with the lyrics above.

Last Monday, I was on a panel in front of 100+ young students and managers who were participating in a competition that Tata sponsors annually called TBLA. The theme was big data, and since I led this group wide initiative by setting up a new company focused on data analytics, the participants were quizzing me on its potential. Suddenly, a colleague comes and whispers in my ear that Chairman Cyrus Mistry has been asked to step down. My head jerks – what? But I am on a panel, so keep answering the questions but signal to the facilitator that we need to wrap this up early. I let the organizers know that I will skip the dinner that follows.

Back in my apartment trying to get information from the company with little success. At 9:00 pm, I get a call from a colleague with whom I had worked very closely and got along famously as we were often on the same side of arguments. He informs me: “it is my unpleasant duty to say your services are no longer required”. No explanation. I query does this mean I do not need to show up tomorrow morning? Receive an affirmative reply. That's it. It's all over in a minute. Now readers, no pity is needed. It is something that has happened to many, and there are entire reality shows on TV built around the theme “You are fired!” But, still nothing prepares you for this. I realize that I am unemployed for the first time since the age of 18.

My first thoughts go to the 70+ people I had accumulated in the Big Data team over the past year. What is going to happen to them? They joined on my word that we were going to make this a core capability of the group. Quickly, I shoot off a text message to a colleague with a plea to take charge of this venture. My four-member team, I am less concerned about as they are enormously talented and familiar enough with the group to land on their feet.

*“You can't break me down
You can't take me down”*

The following morning, what to do? Well, a bit lost, and ready at 8:30, instead of the usual 8:00, I head for my morning Starbucks coffee. I find a new proposition for Starbucks that never occurred to me previously: a place for unemployed managers, all dressed in suits, with nowhere to go. Yes, there is the office to clear out and a final settlement to be agreed on, but I am in no mood to go to Bombay House for this. It can wait for another day.

Once fired, you discover your friends and the integral qualities of those who worked with you. The interesting insight for me was that the higher in the organization you go, this “human” aspect declines. The people at the “bottom” of the pyramid treated me with the same respect and affection as always. Their smiles were genuine and open. Those in the middle, like my team were sincerely sad to see me go. They repeatedly mentioned what fun it was to have worked with me. It was not as if I was fired for

non-performance (my last evaluation was excellent). I always do my best – it's the least I expect from myself and the most anyone can expect from me. I was fired for just being there at my position – working intensely and extensively with Cyrus.

The reaction at the top of the pyramid was interesting. With three exceptions, the many CEOs and top executives I worked with closely for three years went silent. I wonder what it is that the more we have, the more we become prisoners at the thought of losing it, rather than having it set us free. The lesson for my team was clear. I told them these people have made it to the top. They know how the system works. When in future anyone mentions me, please don't say anything positive. Throw me under the bus to gain credibility in the new regime. It's my parting advice.

*"You can't steal the things that God has given me
No more pain and no more shame and misery"*

Despite the unceremonious and un-Tata like end, I have nothing negative to say about the Tata group. It was not the fault of the 670,000 Tata people and does not reflect on them. What I found exceptional about the group was the kind of person that Tata attracts – unpretentious and dedicated. Yes, they really drink, as we would say in America, the "koolaid" of Tata. But I observed how hard they work, and how committed they are to the group and its values. They deserve a great Chairman.

Finally, I really loved the job. It gave me, an academic, a ring side seat to a 100+ billion dollar group. The amazing discussions we had on what the group should look like in 2025, bouncing ideas back and forth, challenging each other, and then coming to a joint view and understanding of the potential portfolio 2025, after debating the trends and financial prospects. In my 30 year career, I had only three bosses who inspired me: Lou Stern, my PhD advisor at Northwestern University; Laura Tyson, my dean at LBS; and you. Thank you, Cyrus.

Let me end with the lines from Bruce Springsteen that were plastered on my walls as a teenager:

*"Someday girl I don't know when
We're gonna get to that place
Where we really wanna go
And we'll walk in the sun
But till then tramps like us
Baby we were born to run"*

Well, folks, I am there, despite being unemployed. And, I am done running.

Warmly

Nirmalya

Magic Dust

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/229-all-that-is-gold-does-not-glitter-not-all-those>