The courage to disagree

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B OOM! There was a loud explosion from the ground floor.

The new principal (just two weeks into her job) of **Sri Kumaran Children's Home, (Bengaluru)** Nandashree Natarajan, hurried out of her office (on the same floor) towards the location of the explosion.

Expecting to see teachers crowding in the corridors, she braced herself to remain calm, even as she raced. To her astonishment, the corridors were empty. She was joined by *just one other teacher*, who had left his class on the third floor to investigate the noise.

The chemistry laboratory assistant and her helpers were safe but shaken, after they had (in their ignorance) poured water over mixed residual chemicals in the disposal area, resulting in a violent reaction.

Walking back to her office, the principal was relieved – *Thank God it was a minor accident and nobody was hurt in the process!*

But why had *no other teacher* come out to see what was wrong? It was too loud a sound *not to be heard* on all floors of the building. *Something was holding them back* – what was it?

Slowly, she began to see that the accident had nailed the burning issue: most of the faculty were in a compliant mode, doing their work sincerely and exactly as they were told to do. It was their job, their workplace, and they strove to meet expectations. As they went about their daily chores, there was a palpable lack of a *sense of belonging* or even a smile. Had they been told to leave their classes to investigate the cause of the explosion, they would have dutifully done so. They were busy covering the syllabus and teaching their classes as always: and doing it excellently.

The principal yearned to bring in a more open culture: where there was a sense of camaraderie among the teachers and herself, where opinions were fearlessly voiced and everyone felt that this was THEIR school.

How was she to set about triggering that change? She decided to turn this into an Action Research (AR) Problem.

In order to frame the problem, she roped in a few teachers who she had already identified as being more communicative. With their help, she systematically surveyed the entire faculty's

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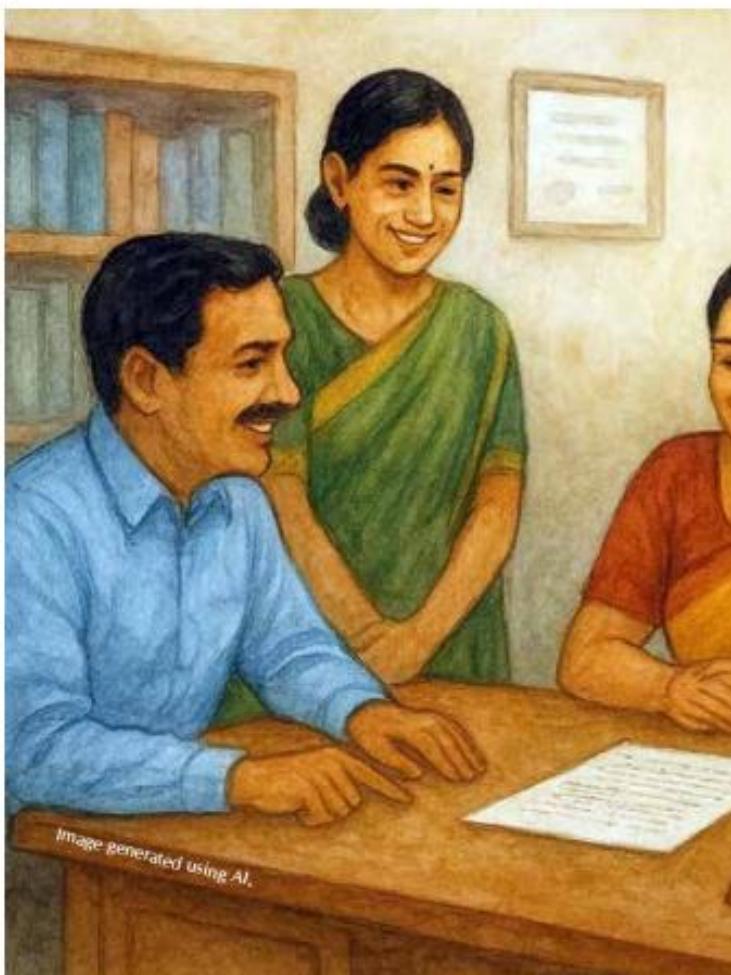
needs: and the findings were startling. Almost all of them articulated the *need for free and open communication!*

So, the AR problem became: *To cultivate a work environment grounded in mutual respect, open communication, and shared values.*

Next, her team designed a set of activities for *five days of empowerment* during the Teachers' Correction-Time (3 to 4 pm): Motivational Monday, Trust Tuesday, Whale Done Wednesday, Thought-Provoking Thursday, and Festive Friday.

On the first Monday, this team held a motivational session to draw out teachers' gratitude towards any colleague who had helped them in the past. For the first time, teachers openly articulated appreciation of their colleagues – which many found very moving. On Trust Tuesday, sharing of personal stories between random pairs of teachers was intended to build openness and trust.
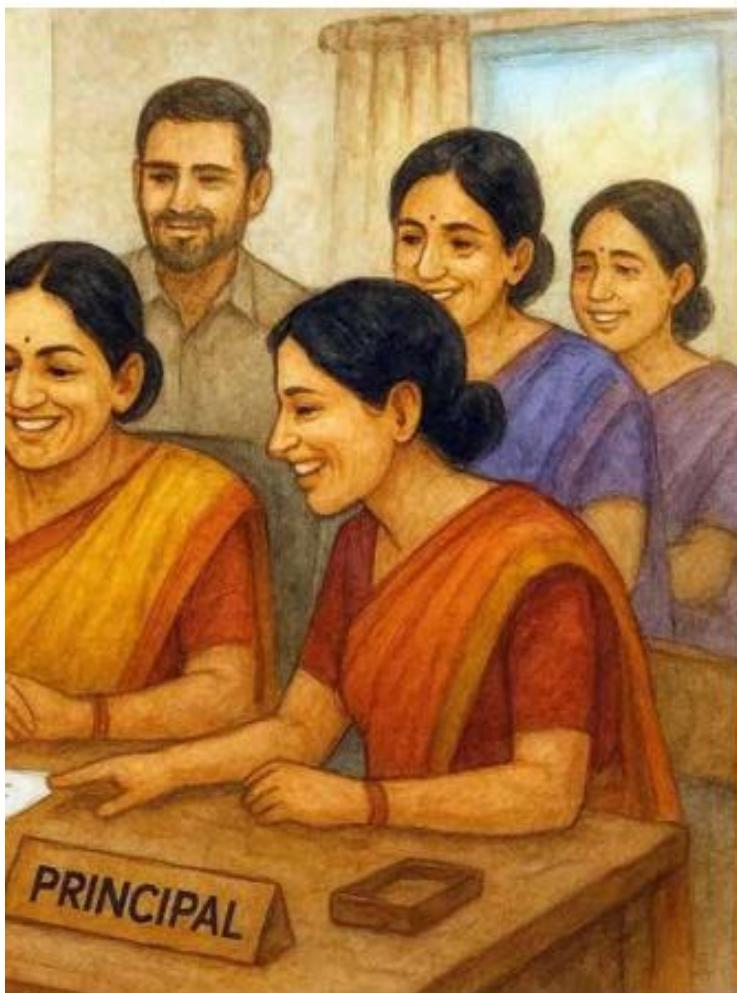
PRINCIPAL

It was after this that the penny dropped. For, just before Whale Done Wednesday, teachers expressed their reluctance to participate further – citing workload and time crunch.

The principal paused: could resistance turn into collaboration? Instead of confronting her teachers, she solicited their suggestions and feedback. This was the *turning point in her AR*: for excellent suggestions emerged, e.g. discussion of real-life case studies. Her team immediately crafted meaningful case studies that led to rich discussions on the following Wednesday.

Now that the ball had been set rolling, Thought-Provoking Thursday didn't need much designing by the core team, as a Grade I teacher volunteered to make a presentation! It all culminated in a truly Festive Friday where visibly smiling teachers showcased their talents.

Happy ending? NO! "This is just the beginning of an ongoing effort to sustain bonds between my teachers and to keep communication alive," admitted Nandashree. "While I can see less stiffness and far more smiles, I know that I have to work towards being *part of a team*, rather than an isolated head of a school."

That 'setback' on Tuesday was in fact an advancement: for teachers who had heretofore been quietly compliant now trusted their principal enough to openly disagree!

So here is a touchstone for heads of schools/teachers:
* How often do your teachers openly disagree with you?
* How freely do your students express opposing views?

References
1. **Whale Done** *The Power of Positive Relationships* By Ken Blanchard
2. https://www.facebook.com/reel/1351022283229308

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