

## Management lesson by Sudha Murthy

It was probably the April of 1974. Bangalore was getting warm and gulmohars were blooming at the IISc campus. I was the only girl in my postgraduate department and was staying at the ladies' hostel. Other girls were pursuing research in different departments of Science.

I was looking forward to going abroad to complete a doctorate in computer science. I had been offered scholarships from Universities in the US. I had not thought of taking up a job in India.

One day, while on the way to my hostel from our lecture-hall complex, I saw an advertisement on the notice board. It was a standard job-requirement notice from the famous automobile company Telco (now Tata Motors). It stated that the company required young, bright engineers, hardworking and with an excellent academic background, etc.

At the bottom was a small line: "Lady candidates need not apply."

I read it and was very upset. For the first time in my life I was up against gender discrimination.

Though I was not keen on taking up the job, I saw it as a challenge. I had done extremely well in academics, better than most of my male peers. Little did I know then that in real life academic excellence is not enough to be successful?

After reading the notice I went fuming to my room. I decided to inform the topmost person in Telco's management about the injustice the company was perpetrating. I got a postcard and started to write, but there was a problem: I did not know who headed Telco.

I thought it must be one of the Tatas. I knew JRD Tata was the head of the Tata Group; I had seen his pictures in newspapers (actually, Sumant Moolgaokar was the company's chairman then). I took the card, addressed it to JRD and started writing. To this day I remember clearly what I wrote.

"The great Tatas have always been pioneers. They are the people who started the basic infrastructure industries in India, such as iron and steel, chemicals, textiles and locomotives.

I posted the letter and forgot about it. Less than 10 days later, I received a telegram stating that I had to appear for an interview at Telco's Pune facility at the company's expense. I was taken aback by the telegram. My hostel mate told me I should use the opportunity to go to Pune free of cost and buy them the famous Pune saris for cheap! I collected Rs 30 each from everyone who wanted a sari. When I look back, I feel like laughing at the reasons for my going, but back then they seemed good enough to make the trip.

It was my first visit to Pune and I immediately fell in love with the city. To this day it remains dear to me. I feel as much at home in Pune as I do in Hubli, my hometown. The place changed my life in so many ways. As directed, I went to Telco's Pimpri office for the interview.

There were six people on the panel and I realized then that this was serious business.

"This is the girl who wrote to JRD," I heard somebody whisper as soon as I entered the room. By then I knew for sure that I would not get the job.

The realization abolished all fear from my mind, so I was rather cool while the interview was being conducted.

Even before the interview started, I reckoned the panel was biased, so I

told them, rather impolitely, "I hope this is only a technical interview."

They were taken aback by my rudeness, and even today I am ashamed about my attitude. The panel asked me technical questions and I answered all of them.

Then an elderly gentleman with an affectionate voice told me, "Do you know why we said lady candidates need not apply? The reason is that we have never employed any ladies on the shop floor. This is not a co-ed college; this is a factory. When it comes to academics, you are a first ranker throughout. We appreciate that, but people like you should work in research laboratories."

I was a young girl from small-town Hubli. My world had been a limited place. I did not know the ways of large corporate houses and their difficulties, so I answered, "But you must start somewhere, otherwise no woman will ever be able to work in your factories."

Finally, after a long interview, I was told I had been successful. So this was what the future had in store for me. Never had I thought I would take up a job in Pune. I met a shy young man from Karnataka there, we became good friends and we got married.

I was feeling very nervous, remembering my postcard episode. SM introduced me nicely, "Jeh (that's what his close associates called him), this young woman is an engineer and that too a postgraduate.

\*(Sudha Murthy is a widely published writer and chairperson of the Infosys Foundation involved in a number of social development initiatives. Infosys chairman Narayan Murthy is her husband.) \*