

# Command Imperative: Mystery Mirror and Phook Theory

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SURJIT SINGH

*“The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard”*

(From a verse in the Katha-Upanishad)

## Prologue

It is well known that leading men in battle, in the face of fire is a daunting task. What is not so well understood is that commanding a large unit or military formation is also a challenging assignment, even during the peace time. *One has to walk over a tight rope to succeed, and that is almost like passing over the edge of a razor.* In 1988, I was tipped for the command of a Base Workshop, and I was preparing myself for that ‘acid test’. As a part of the groundwork, I went over to Chandigarh, where my brother was commanding a Base Repair Depot of the Air Force, which is similar to our Base Workshops. Given below is an account of what I saw and learnt.

## No 3 Base Repair Depot (BRD), IAF, Chandigarh

The little man who sat on the hot seat in the office of Air Officer Commanding (AOC) of the BRD was my brother. Our father found him bone lazy; incapable of performing any strenuous work. But I suspect he was clever. The Air Force chose to overlook his sloth and let him rise. Now, having completed his course at the National Defence College, it was amply clear that he was going places. He sat

there, completely relaxed. There was no paper in the two trays marked “IN” and “OUT” The customary “Pending” bin was conspicuous by its absence. The walls of the large office were bare. No bar charts, no performance curves. On the table, there was a small hand written paper, which my brother permitted me to see. It said,

**“I hate paper work. Even if someone else does it”.**

I had barely settled in my chair, when there was a buzz on the intercom. It seemed that someone wanted to meet him. My brother took something which looked like an engagement diary out of his drawer, opened it and peered into it intently. He then told his PA to let him come. The officer who entered was disposed off in a couple of minutes, and he went away, quite satisfied.

It was clear as crystal that my dear brother had not changed. I asked him how he managed such a large outfit. And he said, “Come, I will show you” And we set off for a ‘*darshan*’ of the unit. Wherever we went, people rushed to greet him. He had a word or two to say to everyone. In most cases, he let his officers speak. He would then say just a sentence or two, and then move on. But I noticed that his tone was different each time. At one workstation, we saw a tall officer, who had a lot of charts and diagrams, and he gave us a detailed account of his achievements. The curve showed that the output of his shop had tripled since he took over. He was keen to give a lecture to the other officers of the BRD on the management techniques he had employed to achieve those results. My brother gave a cold look to him and said, “*Yes. You can do that. But first you must improve the quality of your stuff. That gyro-stabilizer which failed in the flight test last month was overhauled here. Right? If the pilot was not alert, you would have his blood on your hands!*”

Jesus! That six foot tall engineer suddenly looked like a pygmy, and his rose coloured cheeks had turned yellow, drained of blood, in less than a second!

We next went to another shop. The officer in-charge received us. But while he was speaking, my brother’s eyes were elsewhere. He noticed that a junior officer had hidden himself behind a chopper. As soon as the briefing was over, he went that way, and called that man out. He gave the meek man a light hug and asked about his ailing wife. The poor soul, who was obviously commissioned from the ranks, mumbled something about the shortfall in his production, but the AOC was not interested in those details... The boss said, “*I am sure you will soon make up. Your section has never let us down and this little dip is understandable*” Then he ended by saying, “*I saw your son playing*

*basket ball yesterday. I think he has a lot of potential!*" When we left, he clicked his heels and produced one of the smartest salutes I have ever seen.

All through the visit, I observed that my brother was less interested in 'output' and more concerned about the officers and technicians he met. He knew an amazing number of names, and seemed to know all about their specific hopes and aspirations. One of the officers told me that he never wrote a confidential letter to any one: no warnings, no 'Show Cause' notices. His interactions with his boss were also short and crisp, and most often through telephone calls.

When we returned, I asked him what his job, as the Commander was. He thought for a while and then he shared his "*Phook Theory*" with me. It was like Socrates talking to Plato and I find it more appropriate to recount the dialog verbatim. He educated me by asking questions, and I sat like a little child answering as best as I could.

(For those who may not know the meaning of this word let me clarify that the literal meaning of the Punjabi word, 'phook' is air pressure. Metaphorically, it is sometimes used to describe an ego-state. Thus, if someone is hogging a lot of 'phook', he is 'gassed' or brash)

*"When you are driving a vehicle, what happens if the tire pressure is low?"*

*"The acceleration drops, steering becomes hard and the fuel consumption goes up"*

*"Right. You must inflate the wheels. Now what happens if the pressure is too high?"*

*"The ride becomes bumpy, steering wobbles and an odd tire may burst"*

*"Correct. You must immediately pull up to a service station and do the needful"*

After a sip of the juice which had arrived, he said, "*This unit is like a vehicle. I am on the driver's seat. These officers are the 'wheels' of the vehicle. I have only two jobs, one to steer in the correct direction and two, to ensure that the 'phook' level of all my officers is correct, always and every time. So when I see someone down and out, I boost his spirit and if I find a brash officer, I ...*" And to show what he did, he filled air in his cheeks and made a hissing sound.....

Through my mind's eye, I saw that timid officer hiding behind a chopper get a hug and a tall management 'guru' cut to size. Like a little child, I asked him, "But, pray, how do you find whom to pump and whom to deflate?"

*"Ah, well! That is what management is all about!"* There was another pause, but after that, he became serious. He gave me the most profound lesson of that morning, "*That is not difficult. One learns it through experience. The tough part is*

**Man  
Management  
is the most  
important  
facet of  
Leadership.**

*to keep my own 'phook' at the right level. I must not lose my equanimity, no matter what happens. And that is not always easy. I have to make a conscious effort to remain unaffected by the unreasonable letters which I receive from my bosses and the greasy words from sycophants around me."*

Just when I thought the lesson was over, he asked, "*what is more important, technology or people?*"

I looked askance, and said, "*You tell?*"

His answer was unusual. He said, "*Technology is for the middle level officers. At my level, it is my colleagues. Management is all about people. If you do not like people, do not manage. Engineering has many branches, mechanical, electronics, aerospace and so on, but the one which is needed for my job is different. It is called Human Engineering*"

At this point, his telephone rang. That was on his direct line to his AOC-in-C in the Maintenance Command, and his big boss was on the line. From his body language I could make out that the message from the other end of the line was unkind to the point of being painful. My brother kept his cool and offered to get back to his boss within a week, after doing the needful. I could see that he had been caught off guard.

And once again, there was a buzz on the intercom. My brother told the PA to ask the officer to wait for a few minutes. He took a sip of water, and again opened his folding 'diary'. This time he looked into it for a little longer. He then closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and then took one more good look at that mysterious 'folder'. He gave a patient hearing to his colleague also and gave him some time bound directions.

For some unknown reason, I was curious to know as to what he saw in that folding diary. I had an uncanny feeling that it was something else. When I insisted on seeing it, he took it out and gave it to me. Lo and behold. It was a mirror! I nearly screamed, "*Pray, what exactly do you do with this mirror?*"

The reply was simple, but profound, "*Whenever someone enters my office, he comes with a purpose. What I say in words is less important than the look on my face. I want all my visitors to go back with a positive attitude, and that can only happen if the look on my face is sanguine and upbeat!*"

## **Five-O-Nine Army Base Workshop, Agra**

Armed with the 'phook theory' I assumed command of the famous 'Five-O-Nine' Army Base Workshop in Agra, in June 1989. And immediately, I discovered the problem associated with maintaining my own phook in check. The star plate on the car; the traffic coming to a halt to let my car go; a reception at the Agra Club followed by a function organized at Hotel Clark Shiraz by a citizen's forum to welcome me had a way of making me to believe that I had 'arrived'. A sycophant went on to say that no other commandant had been received that way; and that my posting was an event to remember for the citizens in the land of the Taj Mahal. I made a mental note of his name and decided to avoid him, because such dialogs unfocused me. I confess that it needed a great deal of deliberate effort to keep my feet on the ground, but the 'phook' theory helped. And the folding mirror was of great help, in ensuring that the look in my eyes did not betray feelings of anxiety, whenever I suffered from it like all other mortals. I jotted down the tenets of the ego-pressure theory on a piece of paper, and kept it on my table, as a guide. I also applied it to perform my duties, and believe you me, it worked!

Encouraged by the results, I shared this management philosophy with my friends. The feedback which I received was positive, and so I began to believe that between me and my brother, we had discovered a new management 'mantra'.

And then one day, the sky burst and the earth began to rumble... A very dear friend, who had taken these dictums as gospel truth, rang up to say that the theory had failed completely. He said he was in deep trouble. My enquiries revealed that there was a near mutiny in his unit. I requested the colleague to tell me as many details as he could get and then I sent the case study to the author of the theory for advice. The reply came by the return post. In a tersely worded note he wrote,

*"Tell your friend to check his pressure gauge. He seems to be deflating people who have nothing left in their lungs and pumping those who were already on the verge of bursting!"*

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Maj Gen **Surjit Singh** first wrote this article in 1994. An updated version is published now.