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Monday Morning Greetings 2018 #9 – The Bhakti Center: A Case Study in Empowerment

Dhanurdhara Swami February 26th, 2018

The Bhakti Center is flourishing. It is beyond the scope of this post to go into the details, but I think it is self-evident. The Center now offers over 2,500 programs a year with especially large attendance for festivals and *kīrtanas*. It also houses the number one rated vegetarian restaurant in New York City, Divya's Kitchen. More importantly, hundreds of people, many quite established, are enthusiastically embracing Krishna consciousness through their many *śāstra* discussion groups and spiritual programs. It also seems to be continually expanding. What is the secret of their success? There may be several reasons, but one thing for sure is their mood of empowerment.

Before continuing let me define "empowerment" and "disempowerment" to help you understand exactly what I am referring to. They are my own definitions based on my experience. Empowerment: "To recognize, encourage, and facilitate one's abilities and then create parameters by which one can work in a greater managerial or social context." Disempowerment: "To concentrate first and overly on the parameters within which one can work without the requisite acknowledgement and encouragement of one's potential." Disempowerment is also called bureaucracy.

Here is a brief template of the Bhakti Center's success in empowerment. Radhanath Swami and other senior leaders at the Bhakti Center saw the potential of the second generation Hare Krishna devotees. For example Vīrabhadra Rāma, who was born in the Hare Krishna Movement and working in New York City at the time, was encouraged to participate in the development of the project and by that encouragement eventually increased his commitment to the level of initiation. His potential for leadership was soon recognized and he was encouraged to become the Executive Director of the Bhakti Center.

It is interesting to note the board of directors for the Bhakti Center invested in him the full authority to manage the project while still keeping full responsibility as a board to oversee that the project remains healthy within the parameters Śrīla Prabhupāda set. They didn't fall into the bureaucratic trap of delegating the responsibility for him to manage, but keeping the authority for themselves, bogging down decision-making and discouraging initiative. They weren't disappointed with the result.

Vīrabhadra Rāma worked at forming a team of mostly qualified young devotees based on a foundation of mutual trust to assist him in managing the project. As he was recognized and empowered to manage, he similarly empowered others. As a result many qualified people stepped forward, working cooperatively and effectively to push the forward the Bhakti Center's mission. There seems to be no limit to what a project can do if a good leader is empowered and empowering. While initially such a leader has to be involved with the nitty-gritty, or whatever needs to be done, inevitably competent people eager for service will step forward to cover all services. Eventually there will be more people eager to serve than there are positions to fill.

Vīrabhadra told me recently that the greatest challenge now at the Bhakti Center is to engage and empower the many qualified people that are stepping forward spiritually. I think in many ways this parallels the way Śrīla Prabhupāda managed in ten short years to go from a storefront on 26 2nd Avenue to a large worldwide movement, by seeing the qualities in young people, trusting them, and offering them fresh challenges.

Having observed leadership in ISKCON over the last forty years and having been a manager myself for over twenty years, I have come to the firm conclusion that an empowering manager should be out of job within two years. I had mentioned that to Vīrabhadra Rāma when he first took up the job. By the phrase "out of a job" I am certainly not suggesting that a leader relinquishes any of his or her responsibilities, but within two years others should cover most of his or her initial duties so the leader is free to expand the project in other ways. When Vīrabhadra Rāma first took up the post of Executive Director just to cover the needful, he had to relinquish almost 80 percent of his clientele in a very successful life coaching and marma therapy business. I see now, however, that he is free to travel for business when needed to meet his family needs, lead extended pilgrimages to India, deepen his spiritual life and personal study, and concentrate on new initiatives to expand the project.

There is no limit to what can be accomplished when we have this vision and detachment to "recognize, encourage, and facilitate one's abilities" – especially the next generation of devotees. This was Śrīla Prabhupāda's mood. The Bhakti Center is a good study of what happens when we follow his path of empowerment. [1]

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[1] "Our leaders shall be careful not to kill the spirit of enthusiastic service, which is individual and spontaneous and voluntary. They should try to always generate some atmosphere of fresh challenges to the devotees, so that they will agree enthusiastically to rise and meet it. This is the art of management: to draw out spontaneous loving spirit

of sacrificing some energy for Krishna.” Śrīla Prabhupāda letter, 22 December 1972, Bombay

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