

Unleashing the Tiger – The Agora Success Story!

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After being in Team and Leadership Excellence consulting for 10 years, subsequent to 16 years in corporate life for 16 years as Director for Keells Foods and Keells Super, I took on a new interesting challenge as the Chief Executive Officer [CEO] of the Agora Supermarket Chain [owned by the highly diversified Rahimafrooz Group] in Bangladesh in July 2009. This was a secondment from Sensei International where I continued to remain as a Partner and Senior Management Consultant.

This was a 3 year assignment to prepare the company for Rapid expansion. I took over this assignment for 3 reasons; Firstly because Agora was close to my heart as I helped start it as a consultant in 2001 and hence I considered Agora my own baby and I wanted it to be successful. Secondly because I wanted to validate the guidance I give so many companies around the world as a consultant, by being in the hot seat for a while. And thirdly because I respect the Rahimafrooz Group and the family that owns it for running a company driven by 'Values' using 'world-class' management methods.

I now move on after 3 years on the job after having accomplished the task I set out to achieve so that I can continue the planned journey of my life living my purpose.

My dream was to make Agora a world-class company, the pride of Bangladesh and I write this blog with a mix of emotions that include happiness, sadness, fear, pride and hope.

Firstly I am extremely happy that we together achieved the following milestones;

1. We developed a robust 5 year plan [vision 2015] & Annual business plans [ABP's] and introduced a strategic and operational management system to ensure excellent execution.
2. We developed a 'values' driven winning culture with quality leadership and excellent team work driven by behaviours based on Sensei's 10 habits and community building workshops.
3. We developed the Agora Aponjon promise, trained every team member to live it and developed internal trainers to deliver the training. [Aponjon is the Bangla word for 'dear one' or 'near one']
4. We developed a highly engaged team by resurrecting the 'Agora' song, introducing the reciting of the ultimate aspiration, values and quality policy, and energizing ourselves with the Agora song, cheers and the confidence anchor at every meeting in the company.

5. We strengthened Agora with new teams; category, project and property, business process [to launch the new ERP system], business development and logistics. We also re-designing existing teams; HR and Admin [to include a retail school to develop retail talent in Bangladesh, security with a broader role and Government Regulatory Affairs to engage the authorities], supply chain and compliance [to include quality and the quality management system [QMS] that manages the ISO 9000 – 2008 certification]. We also changed the structure of retail operations [earlier named operations], finance and marketing teams to make them more value adding. We recruited, developed & promoted team members to fill in various new roles.
6. We developed a performance oriented culture with Key Result Areas [KRA's] linked to the Annual Business Plan [ABP], company values, 10 habits for effectiveness, Quality Management System [QMS] and Aponjon promise, ensuring monthly coaching, conducting 360 degree surveys to assess ourselves and apprising objectively.
7. We streamlined the employment status with a transparent path to permanent employment and introducing other employee benefits.
8. We achieved ISO 9000 – 2008 certification.
9. We changed the negative perceptions we had in the eyes of our guests regarding quality and price with improvement to the quality of our products and service, launching the 'fresh campaign' and re-launching 'value week' ensuring there were promotional offers 365 days of the year.
10. We opened an outlet in the port city of Chittagong that was profitable from day 1.
11. We made a small profit in my first year in office and a substantial profit in the second year where we received the award as the no 1 company in the Rahimafrooz Group in-terms of achieving revenue targets and no 2 company in achieving profits targets.
12. As the company became profitable team members started earning profit bonus and got recognized and rewarded through the Agora Aponjon Star and Agora Aponjon Superstar programmes.
13. We successfully acquired 5 outlets of a competitor [PQS] and re-branded them 'Agora' and re-launched them in record time.
14. We opened a state of the art fully computerised distribution centre to support our 5 year expansion plan.
15. We migrated to a state of the art ERP system [SAP] and front end retail system [Wincor] to prepare us for speedy unlimited growth.
16. We have 4 new outlets being prepared for opening this year.
17. We have set up a robust small and medium enterprise [SME] fresh produce supplier development process to gear our SME suppliers to support our expansion.
18. We have designed and started the implementation of a 'Retail School' to develop talent for the retail industry in the country.
19. We have developed a world-class team, equipped with world class facilities, guided by world-class leadership to make Agora a world class company.
20. We recruited a world-class CEO, from France with senior level experience at TESCO and Carrefour in Thailand and Indonesia to take us into the next stage of growth and continue the journey to make Agora a world class company, the pride of Bangladesh.

A video of a presentation I made regarding the Agora Success Story, after 2 years in office can be watched on: <http://ranjandesilva.com/videoandaudio/the-sensei-hpi-at-work-for-agera/>. This presentation was made at the at the Bangalore HR summit.

Secondly this is a time of great sadness as I will miss interacting with my dear team members, seeing their smiling faces, hearing their passionate achievements & ideas and working together to face the various challenges and opportunities which is part and parcel of business.

Thirdly I do have a slight fear about the future of the company if the team decide to forget all the positive attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that led us to our success. While the new CEO will bring in a lot of new thinking and strategies to take us forward, he alone can't do it without the support of the rest of the team who needs to sustain and build on the winning culture we have created.

Fourthly, I feel a sense of pride with regard to the fighting spirit and resilience of the Agora team members. This is a trait I see in Bangladeshi's in general with their ability to withstand and bounce back after so many calamities such as wars, floods, poverty, earth quakes, power failures, hartals [general strikes], regulatory challenges etc. but I see more of this quality in the Agora team that makes me feel proud to have had the privilege of leading them.

Finally, I have a lot of hope for Agora's future to not only be a leading retail chain in Bangladesh but also a formidable player in the world retail scene given the strength of our brand, the quality of our team, the resources at our disposal and the foresight of our board of directors.

This success was possible due to various individuals from within the Rahimafrooz Group and external consultants who guided and supported us in our journey. I need to thank the following respected individuals who helped me during my tenure;

- The Rahimafrooz Bangladesh Limited [RABL - parent company] board and the Rahimafrooz Superstores Limited [RSL - owning company of Agora] Board, for the trust placed in me to lead Agora over the last 3 years.
- Mr Niaz Rahim the Managing Director of RSL and the board for guiding and supporting me all the way.
- The management of Rahimafrooz Corporate Office and Brummer [The Swedish private equity firm that has a stake in RSL] for all the guidance provided.
- The external consultants such as Mr Chula De Silva of Visvaka, Ms Farzana Siddique from Sensei International, Mr Rajan and team from Palladium, Ms Parveen and team from BIF, Mr Michael, Ms Emma, Mr Ross from Accenture, Mr Jeep from PUM, Mr Dhanushka from JK logistics, Mr Satish and team from SAP and Ms Susan and team from Wincor for their valuable intellectual inputs.
- Mr Omar Khan, my senior partner at Sensei International for the coaching and guidance given to me to lead the Agora team.
- The Executive committee of RSL for helping me lead the company during good times and challenging times.

- And last but not at all the least my beloved team members of Agora who was ready to try out new thinking, ready to accept tough decisions and ever willing to try new ideas. You made every second of my assignment worthwhile.

I would have liked to have stayed on with Agora to see the rapid expansion, but it was important for me to decide to move on after doing the work I came to do, within the agreed tenure of my assignment. However as I always say, Agora is my baby as I helped start it, Agora will always be close to my heart, I will continue to follow Agora's progress and cheer for their success from far.

A message that I have been delivering all the time over the 3 years as well as in my final weekly message and final floor meetings is about the potential for greatness we have. We all have the potential to achieve your dreams. We all have the potential to make a positive contribution to our family, society, company and country. All we need to do is to live by the RSL values & I + 10 behaviours, follow the QMS processes, deliver the Agora Aponjon promise, learn the retail business deeper, develop leadership and team skills and passionately extend ourselves for the disciplined execution of the plans of the company.

These are the formula that helped 'Unleash the Tiger within us' and this is the formula that will continue to 'Unleash the Tiger within us' with patience, tenacity, willingness to learn from mistakes and resilience to bounce back up when we fall.

Achieving our dreams will take time, there will be challenges on the way, there will be disappointments to face, but we need to be patient and keep at it. The breaks will come at the right time. It will come not on our time frame but the time frame of the almighty who is the architect of the master plan.

We can't rush a sunrise, a journey of a thousand miles starts with one baby step, we can climb the highest mountain one step at a time and God's delays are not God's denials'. Delays and challenges are provided to us for us to get stronger and only when we are fully prepared we are given the fruits of our labour.

So to the Agora team members reading this and everyone else, who want to learn from my experience; go on face those challenges, respond positively, enjoy the journey, Unleash the Tiger within you and savour the success!