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Former Tata Steel MD J.J. Irani on Ratan Tata's leadership style

Jamshed J. Irani January 3, 2013

I hardly knew **Ratan Tata when he did an early stint** in Jamshedpur. He left within a few months of my reaching Jamshedpur in early 1968. In the 1970s, we interacted while he was in charge of Nelco. His first love was the automobile industry and it is in **Tata Motors that he has contributed in great detail** - from design to manufacture to acquisitions. But our interactions grew in the late 1970s, when he started taking an interest in TISCO (then known as Tata Iron and Steel Company, now Tata Steel Ltd). Becoming chairman of the company did not change his attitude - he was deputy chairman before the board appointed him chairman of TISCO in 1993.



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The qualities that I like most about him are his sincerity and total devotion. He is a workaholic. He is also totally devoted to the canines he has had as pets for long years. Even at Bombay House stray dogs are cared for. My best personal memories of him are the after-dinner discussions on a one-on-one basis (or sometimes in a small group), when all those present could open up and freely express their views on all subjects under the sun. He is normally quite reserved and these moments of free expression were out of

the ordinary.

The chairmanship did not change him or his manner of arriving at the most appropriate course of action. He **evoked support from his team** and he still does. Ratan Tata is not the type of boss who is given to thumping the table. He softly mandates, and those to whom the message is addressed get the point very clearly. He thinks big and encourages others to do likewise. He does not discourage those who occasionally fail to deliver.

When dealing with a difference of opinion, he will convincingly present his views but at the same time listen attentively to other points of views and arrive at a consensus. He has always listened to all points of view before evolving a decision in his own quiet but firm way.

The last decade - when I had retired from Tata Steel but still served on different boards of Tata companies as well as Tata Sons - was aimed at growing outside India, thinking big and not changing track when faced with difficulties. If we were convinced about our goals, we

were urged not to give up. Also, another theme was not to give up on our principles of doing business ethically. Ratan Tata had clearly enunciated targets for turnover and profits. All the CEOs accepted these and by and large achieved them.

I may also recall the period prior to my becoming CEO and managing director of TISCO. That was a very turbulent period. I was on very good terms with Russi Mody for 20 years, but he was advised poorly in his final two years at TISCO. He smudged the line between professional management and ownership. The Tatas (both J.R.D. Tata and Ratan Tata) handled the situation with firmness and decorum and the board was with them. But that brief period was awkward for both Ratan Tata and myself. I must thank Ratan Tata for his guidance.

The author is a former managing director of Tata Steel and has also been a director on the board of several Tata Group companies

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