

Vikram Rana at Margot Financial Securities

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Abstract

Well-intentioned efforts to address gender discrimination at the workplace are subverted when people claim concessions as entitlement. Vikram Rana, chief editor and head of production at Margot Financial Securities, Mumbai, was engaged in an energy-sapping battle of nerves with his associate, Neha Salian, an overbearing woman older to him whose workplace ethics were not up to the mark. The management of Margot wanted to promote a women-friendly workplace, and had instituted a Women's Grievance Redressal Committee in keeping with best practices in the industry. Fearing that a complaint to the grievance committee might mar his reputation and career, Vikram was careful in his interactions with his direct report. Neha defaulted on her duties using familial responsibilities as an excuse, and exploited Vikram's inability to confront her openly. He yielded to her manipulation, but retaliated by pointing out her professional inadequacies. As matters spiralled out of control, Vikram feared his attempts to enforce professionalism would be misrepresented as harassment.

The case explores the interplay of gender dynamics and entrenched biases that contribute to toxic relations. It examines the issue of victim-turned-persecutor through different perspectives. Was Vikram an ineffectual boss who succumbed to bullying? Or was he an over-punctilious bully who was difficult to please?

Keywords

Discrimination, gender bias, concessions, harassment, conflict-averse

Vikram Rana switched on the bedside lamp. It was a little after four in the morning. He had spent the better part of the night devising schemes that would put his Editorial Associate Neha in her place and avenge the indignity she had subjected him to. As the chief editor and head of production at Margot Financial Securities, Mumbai, Vikram had done fairly well for himself. But in the four months that had passed since July 2014, he had tried in vain to enforce professionalism in his associate's working style. Neha had not only resisted all feedback, but had repeatedly defaulted in carrying out her duties. The previous evening's altercation had hit a new low in his troubled relationship with her. She had

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alleged that he was deliberately hounding her and had also maliciously accused him of setting up his former associate Lijo for failure. As Vikram relived the unpleasant interchange, uppermost in his mind was the harm she could cause to his reputation if she were to approach the Women's Grievance Redressal Committee with a complaint of harassment. He was so overwrought at the prospect that it was affecting his health. He couldn't go on like this any longer. Naren Bajaj, head of research, would be returning that morning from a business trip. Vikram would have to present his side of the story before Neha misrepresented facts and twisted them out of recognition. But what if she pre-empted him by projecting it as gender insensitivity? It would put at risk all that he had worked hard for.

A Company That Was Selectively Modern

Headquartered in Mumbai, Margot was one of India's fastest developing domestic institutional broking houses and had acquired a reputation for innovative client advice, backed by sound research. The company had been founded in 2001 by Maneet Garg, alumnus of one of India's leading business schools. Before long he had been joined by his batch mate Raghu Saini, who had earlier had a successful run as the marketing head of a well-known FMCG company. Now joint chief executive officers of Margot, Garg and Saini both belonged to business families and brought with them the native sagacity and financial acumen inherent in the mercantile communities of India. While Garg focused on the day-to-day activities at Margot, Saini concentrated on investment banking. Within a decade, Margot had emerged as a leader in the field of financial services, with a presence in over sixty-five Indian towns and cities. The name Margot, an amalgam of Maneet and Raghu, was the brainchild of their media relations manager. With the addition of the alphabet 't' at the end, the name acquired an international flavour that reflected the global aspirations of its founders.

Garg and Saini were keen to position Margot as a company with an international presence, catering to a larger retail client segment. To that effect they had consistently been adopting the best practices of industry leaders, and had ensured diversity in the workforce. Nonetheless, there was skewness in the gender composition of personnel at Margot. Most of the analysts were men; except a handful, all of the women occupied lower rungs in the corporate hierarchy. The analysts, mostly star performers from the Indian Institutes of Management, were considered to be of a higher breed that dwelt in the rarefied atmosphere of debt capital markets, commodities, asset management and such. For the major part they preferred not to deal directly with the associates. The organizational pyramid was fairly inelastic, its values reflective of a risk-averse, socially conformist trading community. As one of the vice presidents had remarked, 'Margot is like most of us ... selectively modern, but essentially conservative.'

Vikram Rana

In 2004, after a stint as the editor in a leading financial daily, Vikram had joined as an associate in the research department at Margot's headquarters in Mumbai. With an honours degree in communication and journalism from one of the best institutes in the country, he was particularly well suited for his role at Margot. In 2007, in acknowledgement of his consistently good performance, he had been promoted to chief editor and the head of production. Now in his eleventh year at Margot, he had settled into a comfortable groove, secure in the knowledge that Naren Bajaj, the head of research, valued his work. Over the years workflow in the department had acquired a steady pace and pattern. The analysts who covered various sectors such as metal, auto and pharma sent their reports to the editing team. Post editing,

the reports were vetted by the analysts, and sent to the production team for the formatting of the tables and graphs. Vikram oversaw the entire process. Once the final copy had been approved, the reports were published, uploaded on the company portal and mailed to clients. Although the editorial responsibility rested primarily with Vikram and his associate, the organizational structure required both of them to work in close collaboration with the analysts (see Figure 1). Vikram often socialized after hours with some of the analysts, and the easy camaraderie they shared outside the workplace was consequently reflected in the complementarity of their working styles. However, with his associate Lijo Thomas he had always had a purely professional relationship; he was cordial but distant, taking care to ensure that over-familiarity did not erode his authority.

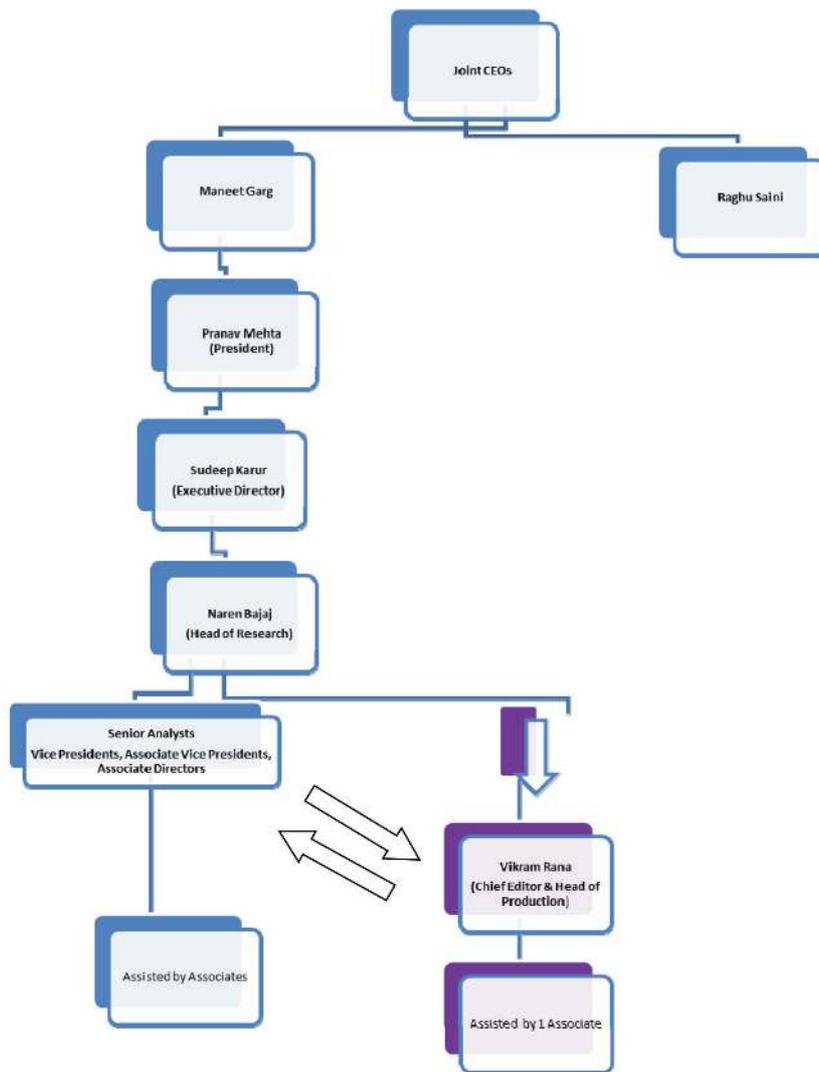


Figure 1. Organizational Structure at Margot Financial Securities

Source: Author.

The New Associate

After Lijo suddenly decided to put in his papers in July 2014, Neha Salian was appointed in his place. Of all the applicants who responded to the newspaper advertisement, she was the only one with the experience of editing financial reports. Right from the beginning, Vikram had reservations about her. For one, she was forty-eight years old; he would have preferred someone younger who would be more malleable and more amenable to acculturation. Moreover, her career graph was punctuated with job changes. He had noted with disapproval that she had not stayed on for more than two years in a single place. Since the associate was required to report to him directly, the others on the selection panel had left the final decision to him. For want of a better candidate, he had agreed to try her out, hoping she would bring a better skill-set to the table than the fresh-out-of-college candidates who couldn't string together a single sentence without descending into colloquialisms. After all, she had worked in newspapers and financial institutions as an assistant editor, and despite a rather middling degree in commerce, she appeared adequately equipped with the skills required of her: namely, sprucing up reports by checking for language, grammar, presentation and titles.

In less than a month, Vikram had a reason to regret the decision bitterly and wished he had let his better sense prevail. Neha had proved below average on all counts; what was worse, she had stubbornly resisted any form of feedback. She repeatedly compromised his carefully built-up reputation for in-time submissions and meticulous planning. He had always taken pride in his ability to manage time; procrastination, however, left him with a nagging sense of guilt. It was just not the way he liked to work. Besides, he did not want pending work to interfere with his leisure activities. Nothing riled him more than having to miss out on his workout or his social life! A bachelor by choice, his appearance belied the fact that he was pushing forty. Prakhar, the associate director who oversaw the coal sector, often teased him that he was quite the charmer; the women in the office always had a ready smile for him. He was a man well pleased with his life and revelled in the compliments that came his way. Not that he was unaware of his own shortcomings. He knew he was considered a snob by the associates, and in rare moments of introspection, he acknowledged he was rather finicky. As an associate had observed:

Rana sir is always very polite and helpful. But he makes his associate rewrite every report several times. It was frustrating for Lijo because nothing he ever wrote was considered good enough. Not everyone has had the advantage of a top-class education like Rana sir. And frankly, who cares if there is a minor mistake in writing English. The important thing is to communicate the basic message.

Vikram had heard talk around the office of Lijo's rather ungracious reception of his suggestions for improvement. He realized that he had failed to read the import of Lijo's sullen silences. He remembered the training sessions the HR department had arranged for all the senior managers on how to give effective feedback. True to his nature, Vikram had indicated he was averse to soft-soaping people into correction. He preferred laying it on the line, clearly pointing out the repercussions of underperformance. Watching him go through a role-play session during the training, Prakhar had observed: 'Ease off, you can't expect everyone to be perfect!' Vikram had protested, 'I can't make do with slipshod work. That's a sure-fire way of lowering the bar.' Prakhar shook his head in reproof, 'Yeah, of course, just don't chew people out, okay?'

The words had struck home. Thereafter, Vikram had made a conscious effort to tone down his criticism at the time of appraisal interviews.

Victim or Persecutor?

Notwithstanding his reputation for punctiliousness, Vikram was well regarded at Margot. He was a tad exacting, but known to be fair to a fault. He had never really failed to get the cooperation of his colleagues before he met Neha. She had stonewalled all his efforts to alter her casual approach to editorial errors. He hated her for taking advantage of his insistence on perfection! She knew he was a stickler for time and accuracy; rather than miss the deadline he would prefer to finish the task himself. She reneged on her words, failed to adhere to schedules, flouted instructions. He could do no better than protest angrily.

Even after all this time Vikram winced whenever he recalled the incident of the insurance report. As the report was urgent, they had agreed to work on it over the weekend. Despite the fact that he had divided the work fairly, Neha insisted on running the allocation by Nikhil, the analyst handling the insurance sector, to confirm that the distribution was evenhanded. Vikram was irked by her distrust of him but desisted from expressing his irritation. Around 8.45 on Sunday evening, when he was out for dinner with friends, Nikhil called him, 'Vikram, any idea where Neha can be reached? I've been trying these last three hours, but her phone is out of coverage area. I tell you I am fed up of waiting for her inputs.' After several attempts when Vikram was finally able to contact Neha, she told him she was 40 km from home, on the outskirts of Mumbai, and would reach only after 10 p.m. Then he did not mince words: 'Look here, we'll be in trouble if Nikhil complains to Bajaj. You were supposed to complete the work and send it to him. You knew that very well.' She reacted with more than her characteristic aggression, 'I'm stuck in traffic, so what can I do! If you want to complain to Bajaj go ahead, I'll talk to him. Yes, I know you are my boss. No need to remind me!'

Vikram had no choice but to abandon his friends midway through dinner and go to a cyber café to complete Neha's part of the report. At lunch the next day Nikhil had remarked, 'As far as I am concerned Margot has only one editor, and that's you. Do me a favour. Make sure I don't ever have to depend on her again.'

Vikram had a horrible sense of *déjà vu* in all his interactions with her; it was always a family crisis that merited immediate attention. On 10 October, she had sent him a message in the middle of the afternoon, 'My aunty is seriously unwell and I cannot attend to her as I'm stuck with the report.' He pointed out that she was supposed to have mailed the report the previous evening. She messaged back, 'My husband was travelling last week and he returned last night. So I did not get time to finish the report.' Within minutes the incomplete document was in his mailbox; she had edited barely two paragraphs. Vikram seethed in helpless rage. It was poor comfort that he was the chief editor. As on several other occasions, he was saddled with tasks his associate could easily have disposed of at her level.

Caught in a Bind

Was Vikram an ineffectual boss succumbing to her bullying tactics? Or was he the bully, as she alleged? He was aware he was walking the tightrope between confrontation and craven compromise. He had wanted to take the matter up with Bajaj, but was advised against it by his friends, 'No way! You'd have the resident feminazi baying for your blood!' The term was used derisively among the analysts to refer to ladies who protested against gender discrimination in the office. He knew he had to tread carefully whenever he had to deal with Neha. No one in Margot could afford to forget the case of Hemant Soren, the Auto Sector, Vice President. A reclusive man in his early forties, Hemant had been accused by his secretary of using unseemly language while reprimanding her. When the matter had been escalated to

the senior management, the general feeling in the office was one of incredulity. Barring a few, most of the employees were of the opinion that the warning was well deserved because the lady in question had been negligent in carrying out her duties. Hemant had admonished her very sternly, but the language he had used did not come under the ambit of harassment, let alone intimidation. To add to the chagrin of the management, the news had been leaked to the media, presumably by a disgruntled employee. Although the charges had not been established, for over a week speculation had been rife in the papers about the alleged misconduct by a 'senior corporate executive from a leading financial services firm'. Online opinion pieces by women activists had roundly condemned corporate India's tendency to trivialize cases of harassment. Eventually, rather than face the ignominy of the interrogation, Hemant had preferred to resign from his position. And Margot had gone all out to contain the damage. Hurriedly, a Women's Grievance Redressal Committee had been instituted to address issues faced by the women in the office. As mandated by the law, 50 per cent of its members were women, and Mehnaz Wadia, the only woman among the senior analysts, had taken charge as the presiding officer of the committee. Aside from cases pertaining to sexual harassment, the committee was also expected to look into complaints of gender-based discrimination, creation of a hostile work environment or humiliating treatment detrimental to a woman's health or safety. Garg had personally met all the senior male employees, asking them to be empathetic with and concede to women's requests for concessions at the workplace. Margot was determined to project the image of a firm that was woman-friendly and facilitated work-life balance.

Vikram had been accommodating all along, making allowances for Neha's domestic responsibilities; her children's examinations, husband's tours and for the numerous ailing relatives who made demands on her time. And the demands were unending. By mid-October, she had already consumed most of the leave she had been allotted for the calendar year. Yet, he was irritated by this sense of entitlement with which she claimed concessions. There was no appreciation of the adjustments, and the myriad little sacrifices he made to suit her convenience. It was even more annoying when she imputed that he was wedded to his work since he had 'no family responsibilities'. He resented the implication. Was 'me time' the prerogative only of married men and women? Yet, despite her rather intrusive personal comments, he made sure he was scrupulously professional in his interactions. It was beneath his dignity to have a public showdown with her.

The Auto Report

Work trundled along without interruptions only because Vikram made sure the processes were not driven off the rails. But matters came to a head, barely a month later on 12 November 2014. Vikram was deep in discussion with the analysts, when Neha stopped by with a coffee cup in her hand, 'I have to attend a wedding tomorrow, so I'll come in the evening shift.' He frowned. He would have to alter his plans and come in the morning. He nodded reluctantly. His mind was racing, since the deadline for the submission of the auto report was looming large. If she started working on it around 5 p.m., she'd have it ready by 9, with luck. He swallowed the reproach that rose to his lips. Bandyng words with her was unproductive; besides, he was acutely conscious there were others around.

Next morning, he had just finished his workout routine at the gym, when he heard the ping of an incoming WhatsApp message. It was Neha. 'Not coming today. Cousins are visiting.' He swore under his breath. This was the second time this week she had made an excuse to skip work. Vikram dialled her number:

Listen, you know it's a heavy results day. That sector note has to be edited today. I've got a doctor's appointment this evening, I got it changed because you made a shift change request. Now you tell me you can't come,

so I'm stuck with two back to back shifts! What do you mean I am unfair? You are the one playing this flip-flop game!

People were staring at him curiously. His voice had risen to an angry pitch. A nerve twitched in his temple signalling the onset of a headache. Muttering an apology, he picked up his bag and left. By now he had reached the end of his tether. He brought the car to a halt by the side of the road and punched out the message, 'Work from home but complete the report. We need it today.'

Vikram had already been at work for over three hours the next day when Neha walked into the office. He knew she had worked till late because she had mailed him the report early that morning. He waited for her to settle down before sending for her. Her voice snarled over the intercom, 'Don't bug me. I've been working till three in the morning.' He shot off a two-line mail, pointing out certain inadmissible errors she had made (he had chosen to ignore the other obvious grammatical mistake in the first line of the report). He indicated that he had discussed the very same inaccuracies with her a day earlier and she had agreed to be careful.

What happened next was unprecedented. Neha stormed into his workstation. Arms akimbo, she stood before him, her voice ringing across the office:

What is your problem Mr Rana? Nothing seems to meet your impossibly high standards! You keep on giving me negative feedback all the time. You think you can scare me with your superior ways? But I'm not scared ... not of you ... nor anyone ... I don't care! You forced Lijo to leave! And now you are after me! I want to speak to your reporting authority.

Vikram paled in fury. The allegation was wildly irresponsible and unjustified. All eyes were on them. He was aware anything he said in a fit of anger could be used against him. With an effort he kept his voice down, 'Please do so. I do not wish to discuss this any further with you.' Affecting nonchalance, he returned his gaze to the computer screen, thinking furiously. She was maligning him in public. This was more than he could tolerate. Naren Bajaj was on official tour. Should he write to him apprising him of the turn of affairs? Or should he wait till Bajaj's return the following day? Should he send Neha a strongly worded reprimand memo, putting things on record, and building his case? What if she approached Mehnaz Wadia, the analyst who headed the Women's Grievance Redressal Committee? There had been witnesses to the scene. Would they stand by him if matters turned ugly? What should be his next move?

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