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POPY UMBRELLA MART-A CASE OF ORGANISATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN SMEs JOB P A

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ABSTRACT

Popy Umbrella Mart, a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME), is a success story for creativity and innovation and organizational excellence. By bringing hundreds of innovative products in Indian umbrella market it stands first to bag ISO 9001:2000 in umbrella manufacturing. Popy bagged the prestigious Rajiv Gandhi National Quality Award in the year 1999 for its efforts for bringing out quality products and for excellence of operations in the field of umbrella manufacturing. Popy's quality standard became the benchmark for ISI specifications for umbrellas in India. Popy is a well said answer to those who question the suitability of Kerala, which is ruled alternatively by left and right Governments, for doing business. Popy is an inspiration to those who are reluctant to start business in Kerala, for fear of organizational culture and industrial climate, and an example of correct blending of experience with modern management techniques for bringing excellence in performance. Organisational excellence of Popy is analised using Peters and Waterman's (1982) principles, EFQM model and the new excellence frame work, developed by the author;

KEYWORDS: Popy Umbrella Mart, Organisational Excellence, EFQM, Excellence Framework

INTRODUCTION

Popy Umbrella Mart, a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME), is a success story for creativity and innovation and organizational excellence. Popy is located in Alleppey, popularly known as Venice of the East, in the state of Kerala in India. Popy is a registered trade mark for all the thirty four items from pin to airplane, but now concentrating only on manufacturing and selling of umbrella in and outside the state. Its daily production varies between 9600 to 12000 umbrellas which can meet only half of the demand expected in Kerala. It is a company which removed its website for a while from internet in order to curtail the additional demand created through the internet from in and abroad markets. By bringing hundreds of innovative products in Indian umbrella market it stands first to bag ISO 9001:2000 in umbrella manufacturing. Popy bagged the prestigious Rajiv Gandhi National Quality Award in the year 1999 for its efforts for bringing out quality products and for excellence of operations in the field of umbrella manufacturing. Popy became instrumental in transforming a mere business, making and selling of umbrella, to a decent industry in India. Popy's quality standard became the benchmark for ISI specifications for umbrellas in India.

Popy shows exceptional brilliance in bringing quality products, product innovation, marketing of its products, meeting competition, understanding and dealing with culture of its customers and employees and making a company an excellent one. In the year 2006, Popy umbrella became the second most popular product in Kerala according to a survey conducted by "Dhanam Magazine". Popy is a well said answer to those who question the suitability of Kerala, which is ruled alternatively by LDF and UDF Governments, for industrial entrepreneurs. Popy is an inspiration to those who are reluctant to start business in Kerala for fear of organizational culture and industrial climate and an example of correct blending of experience with modern management techniques for bringing excellence in performance.

HISTORY

Before the independence of India, Kasim Karim Settu, a Pakistan national, and Abraham Varghese (later popularly known as "Kuda Vavachan"), a Keralite, were running an umbrella mart in Alleppey. After independence, Kasim Karim Settu went to Pakistan selling his stock to Kuda Vavachan (Kuda is the Malayalam name for umbrella) and Kumara Swamy Reddiar, a textile owner in Alleppey. They started partnership business under the name 'Radhakrishna Umbrella mart'. After 12 years of partnership business, in 1954, Vavachan parted with Reddiar and started his own business under the name St. George Umbrella Mart. There were only nine employees and he could produce and sell only 6000 umbrellas per year. St. George umbrella, with the backing of modern equipments for umbrella manufacturing, could grow to produce and sell 2500 dozens of umbrellas per year.

However, in 1995 due to unavoidable family reasons St. George umbrella mart had to close down its business giving way to the opening of Popy Umbrella Mart by Vavachan's Son T.V Skaria (popularly known as 'Popy Babichan') and John's umbrella mart by his brother. When change of management was taking place, Babichan made it a point to keep all the employees and distributors of St.George Umbrella mart loyal and quality concept developed by his father with Popy. Before the closure of St.George Umbrella mart, they started to search for a better name for their product. They offered prize for suggesting a good name. Though they received 25000 entries, nothing was as attractive as "Popy" that they put after the pet name of their youngest son. This name clicked very well as a popular name among kids, youngsters and old alike.

The freedom that Babichan got from his father at the age of 14, for doing experiment in bringing innovative products, helped him to understand the intricacies of kuda manufacturing, selecting and purchasing good quality raw materials and doing marketing and R & D activities in Popy. The freedom he got from his father at his early age to travel to Bombay alone for selecting and purchasing components of umbrella later prompted his mind to travel to Japan, Singapore and Taiwan and other countries in search of good quality materials for umbrella manufacturing. By that time he could increase the production to one lakh dozen umbrellas per year. He gave the same freedom to his son Davis Thayyil, an MBA holder, to experiment and innovate. Now the production has increased to 2.5 lakh dozens per year and hundreds of varieties of umbrellas are being manufactured in Popy.

THE LEADERSHIP

The correct blend of Babichan, with long years of hands on experience, and Davis, with modern management inputs, became the change agents for Popy. The long years of experience that Babichan gained, under his father as a worker in St.George umbrella mart, gave him knowledge on quality of raw materials required for the production of first quality umbrella and on marketing techniques. He could identify areas where improvements were necessary, he could identify part manufacturers in and abroad, he could understand the empowerment requirement of his employees for creativity and innovation and he could study the culture of Keralites as employees and customers. He has an innate skill of finding the colour of the umbrella which would click for the future years. He has an innate skill of predicting the colour psychology of customers each year. Regular interaction with kids and children and watching cartoon films enables him to design state of the art umbrellas for them. His marketing strategy is superb. About 90% of Popy umbrellas are being sold in Kerala of which 25% is sold for children. Presently there are about 5000 distributors and agents and another 8900 are in the queue.

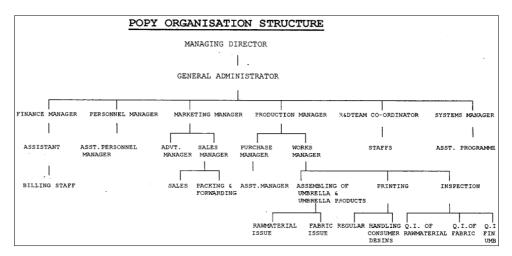


Figure 1

THE MARKET PROMOTION

With two of its striking advertisements at the time of daily news, Popy captured about 50% of the market share in India. One was a dancing situation in rain by kids singing "mazha mazha kuda kuda Mazha vannal popy kuda....." (Meaning, "rain, rain....umbrella, umbrella.... when rain comes, take Popy."). The other was a school situation singing "vadi kondu thallalle sare Popy kuda kondu thallikko venel..." (Meaning, "Teacher do not beat us with stick but beat us with Popy if you want"). These advertisements were received by all sections of consumers from kids to old aged alike. These advertisements with uncompromising quality and reasonable price made Popy the leader in the run. There is a situation in Kerala, at the time of school admissions, people deserting textile shops and stationary shops that do not stock Popy umbrella. Davis was instrumental in these advertisements.

HANDLING COMPETITION

Popy was invited among other umbrella manufacturers to represent in a meeting in Delhi for deciding on the benchmarking specifications of umbrella for ISI certifications. Babichan went with Popy specifications and the details of process of umbrella manufacturing and, surprisingly, the committee accepted his specifications for ISI and made him chairman of the committee. Popy reached by that time, at such high standards of quality, that other manufacturers could not reach with the technology and work force they had. Popy only got the certification and this lead to the increase in Popy sales and consequent closing down of many competitors in India. Though it was not intentional on the part of Popy to remove competitors from the market, innovation and creativity ultimately became a good strategy for handling competition in the industry.

ISI HELPS POPY IN RETURN

About 65% of the components of Popy kuda come from abroad. Japan, Singapore, Dubai, Taiwan and Germany are some of the countries from which parts are imported. Koyoto Company in Japan was very reluctant in supplying parts to Popy, an Indian company, on the assumption that they would not respect contracts. Babichan was able to convince the Chairman of Koyoto by showing of the ISI certification and of his position as chairman of the certification committee. Because of this, Popy could import best quality parts from Japan on this contract and hence is thankful to the ISI certification.

EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

When St. George umbrella mart was closed and Popy was started, Popy took all the employees from St. George

along with all their distributors and agents. Nobody lost his job because of the change of management. The quality concept of St.George was copied and Popy tried to improve upon that. Popy gave full freedom to its employees for nurturing creativity and innovation. However, at the same time, each product is given a serial number and a register is maintained on who assembled the product and who made the stitching etc. This is a management principle according to Peters and Waterman as freedom with accountability. Popy manufacture only first quality products and they don't have a system for second's sale. The employees in Popy do only very important operations such as training of new employees and family unit members, inspection of products coming from family units etc. Popy out sources to companies in and outside India for its components and to family units in Kerala for product assembling.

OUT SOURCING, COLLABORATION AND JOINT VENTURE

Cloth is an important component of an umbrella. It should withstand both the heavy down pore in monsoon and high heat in the summer season. Taiwan is best known for its high quality umbrella cloth. There is collaborative agreement to get Taiwan cloth. Imported cloth from Taiwan comes to Popy factory in Dubai where it is cut and stitched in shape. For manufacturing frame and stick there are two factories in India as joint ventures. Fulex Steel Printab, located in Falna in Rajasthan and Fuma Umbrella Works, located in Thana in Maharastra are Popy's joint ventures. The handle is made of virgin plastic material and the engraving is done by German paints. The design is prepared by R & D of Popy and is sent to listed manufacturers for production in order to maintain quality standard. Popy is aware of the fact that second quality materials are available in India at half the price that they pay now, but do not want to compromise on quality. Average price of Popy umbrella is from Rs.150 to Rs.200 and customers know that they are paying for the quality.

R & D AND INNOVATION

Popy has its Research and Development department. The Chairman does not sit in a room, but in an open area from where he can watch those on the street and those who come for purchase in factory outlet. He does his market research by sitting and watching. His selection of red colour for the year 2006 and blue colour for 2007, discarding previous year colours such as green and yellow proved successful. He discusses with children, who come with their parents, about latest cartoon films and cartoon story heroes. Based on this he invented an umbrella which shows cartoon pictures when the umbrella gets wet and these were in high demand by the kids. He design pictures and handles and send it for manufacturing outside. Some of the other attractions are A C umbrella with ultra vibrant coating, water proof umbrella with WPWR coating, light house umbrella which lights up when opened, godfather umbrella used as walking stick also, gems umbrella made of single cloth without stitching, Teflon umbrella which does not get wet in rain, torch umbrella which could work also as a torch light in the night, comic umbrella with cartoon pictures, five fold Nokia umbrella which look like a cellular phone etc. The latest inventions of Popy include a biggest smallest umbrella called 'Popy Nano' and 'Seven wonder', an example of paradigm stretching innovation, that could be converted to torch light, mariners compass, lens, mirror, storage space and a whistle. Twenty five years back 50% of the umbrella demand in Kerala was met by other state manufacturers where as now other state demand is met by Popy products. Popy umbrellas are being produced by skilled employees with, each step in assembling undergoing, rigorous quality check. In the market other umbrellas are purchased only if Popy is not available.

THE PROCESS

Umbrella manufacturing in Popy is highly labour intensive. About 8900 distributors are waiting for the product to get distributed. Popy want to raise the production from 800 dozens to 1000 dozens per day for the whole year. Popy has a vacancy of about 1000 skilled employees. Popy has gone for automation under the leadership of Davis, resulting in

uncompromising product quality. Popy is starting a new factory in Chennai and they are going for more family units in Kerala, to suit the culture of Keralites.

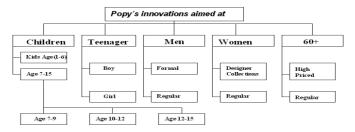


Figure 2

HANDLING CULTURE

The State of Kerala is located at the southern most part of India. It is like a long strip along the coast of Arabian Sea. Climate is hot and humid except monsoon season. This make the people succumb to fatigue doing manual work. They prefer office work rather than physical work. They want to remain clean throughout the day and it is very difficult to distinguish employees from employers, looking at their dress pattern. People are literate and the Kerala life cycle is more oriented to political side than money making or education now. At the time of Nehru ministry it was education cycle for Keralites and many departments were headed by Nairs and Menons from Kerala as advisors. In 1980s it was money making cycle for Keralites and many were migrated to Gulf countries for making money and now is the time for doing politics. Communism is spreaded among people, like tea from the teabag in hot water (Arundhadhi Roy, 1997). Alleppey is a well known communist place with big political movements such as "Punnapra Viayalar movement".

Basic big industries are less in Kerala because of lack of required raw materials and due to energy problems. Best option for Kerala is small scale industries as in Singapore. SME, tourism, IT and education sectors got good chances to flourish in Kerala and Popy is an example of this. Popy understand these factors well and keep the very minimum required number of employees inside their factory. Keralite's attitude towards group work, self leadership and prestige need is satisfied by Popy's outsourcing to family units in Kerala. The system is to provide raw materials to family units and get back the finished products form them.

Management of Popy takes care of the customer culture also. Babichan believes in Gandhi's principles for dealing with the customers. According to Gandhi, the customer is the most important visitor in the company premises, he is not dependent on the company but the company needs him, he is not an interruption but he is the purpose of it, he is not an outsider but he is a part of it, company is not doing him a favour by serving him but he is doing a favour to company by allowing the company to serve him (Tav and Khoo, 2002). Retail price of the product is fixed on January every year and the price will not fluctuate through out the year or among the distributors. Fair deal with all the customers make the customers happy and they remain loyal to the company. An agent or a distributor is not authorized to change the price for improving his sales.

Every customer with a Popy umbrella in his hand is an advertiser. Company, with its quality and reliability initiatives, does not make the customer to return to them for repair and complaints. But the customer; with the word of mouth, sends other customers to the Popy shops for furthering the sales.

Textile shops and stationary shops are the distributors and sellers of Popy. They believe that presence of Popy in their shop would boost the sale of other products also in the shop. Such is the loyalty of the customers to Popy due to the quality of the product. In the year 2006, Popy was selected as the second best liked product of Kerala. Presence of John's

Umbrella Mart nearby Popy make them vigilant to keep their product innovative and of good quality. The competition is a healthy one because of the demand supply disparity. Where Popy cannot meet the demand they inform John's to supply their product.

EXPERIENCE MEETS MODERN MANAGEMENT IN POPY

The chairman Babichan is a person with years of hands on experience in umbrella manufacturing. He worked as an employee for about 12 years before becoming the chairman of the company. He could deal with all quality problems, culture problems, marketing problems, financial problems, customer and supplier problems, employ empowerment problems and could lead the company to success and excellence. His son Davis, after completing his MBA with a thesis in umbrella manufacturing, joined Popy. Like his father, Babichan gave full freedom to his son in the company for doing experiments. Davis now deals with production, R & D and marketing and Babichan deals with finance. Davis introduced CAD/CAM in umbrella design and in manufacturing.

Popy is meeting only half of its demand now. Popy web site once reinstated, the demand for Popy would rise in national and international markets. ISO 9001:2000 has to be kept with, by taking care of the quality, when production is increased. Parts manufacturing has to be looked in to. Manual intensive process has to be converted to machine intensive without compromising on the quality. Creativity and innovation has to be carried forward for survival in the market. Can Davis operate with more family units in Kerala or will he switch over to other states for manufacturing and assembling. His father's words give hope for Kerala. "I am born in this place and I have the right to do my business with success here as people have the right to do politics".

SOCIAL WELFARE IN POPY

Popy takes care of its employees well. Popy introduced many welfare programs for its employees such as supporting employees at their house construction, their daughters' marriage, their children's education etc. Children of employees, after passing tenth standard, can join Popy as an employee if they decide so. Also Popy is involved in a social welfare society for mentally retarded children. All these and more make Popy a friend in need and friend indeed.

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES FOR POPY

Popy made mere making and selling of umbrella in India to transform itself to a decent industry. Earlier umbrella industry was not considered for recognition and reward. Popy's initiatives provided many things to umbrella industry in India. Popy became the benchmark in umbrella manufacturing and ISI specifications are given by Popy only. The following awards and rewards that Popy bagged during their success trip are worth mentioning.

•	IMM civil award	1992,1993,1998
•	Bharath Udyog Jyothi Award	1993
•	Bharath Vikas Gold Award	1996-97
•	ISO 9001 Certification	1997
•	Business Watch Most Successful Business Man	1997-98
•	Business Deepika Business Man of Kerala	1998
•	Formas Taffeta Gold Award	1998

•	Rajiv Gandhi National Quality Award	1999
•	Akshay Award	1999
•	Kerala Consumer Protection Council Award	2000
•	AKCC Sadhbodhi Award	2000
•	Dhanam Award	2005
•	Second Top Popular Brand of Kerala	2006

ANALYSIS OF ORGANISATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN POPY

After McKenzie's 7S framework, Peters and Waterman (1982) came with eight principles on which companies can try to become excellent. The principles are bias for action, close to the customer, autonomy and entrepreneurship, productivity through people, hands on and value driven, stick to the knitting, simple form and lean staff and simultaneous loose tight properties. Bias for action urges to do something in action rather than only doing lip servicing. Just as we don't learn anything in science without experiments, we don't learn anything in business without trying, failing and again trying. No amount of analysis, especially market research without experimenting will lead to true innovation. By close to the customer it means everybody in the business has to be in touch with the customer in terms of taking their suggestions and problems seriously to improve upon the current product and to come up with products which will suit the customer in the future. By autonomy and entrepreneurship it conveys the idea that "small is beautiful" and to split the big corporation in to handy small units so as to enable entrepreneurship behavior inside work units which will enable the big total to achieve its goals.

Though everybody in the higher pyramid in the company talk well about taking care of its people seldom they believe in the power of common people in attaining productivity and excellence, productivity through people exactly deals with this aspect. Hands on and value driven insists executives to keep in touch with the firms essential business and to figure out what the company stands so as to manage towards that value system. Stick to the knitting asks the company to stick on the business the company knows well rather than to invest in many other businesses about which the management does not know anything. Try outsourcing things that the company does not have the know-how and are seen not profitable to produce inside. Simple form lean staff means that to have few administrative layers and few people at the upper layer. Fostering a climate where there is dedication to the central values of the company combined with tolerance for all who accept those values is what is expected of loose and tight property of excellence.

At the first visit to the company one feels about the positive energy inside the firm and positive attitude of the people from top to bottom to handle various situations fulfilling the conditions for bias for action. One could notice that paper works, as confined only to receiving purchase orders and sending bills and such unavoidable activities. Written communication gives way to oral communication inside the company. The chairman and managing director keep a habit of managing by walking around and workers and staff feel free to clarify their doubts directly to the superiors than waiting for the superior to instruct. Their continuous investment of time, energy and money on creativity and innovation only helped them to bring such variety of products based on paradigm preserving and paradigm stretching strategies of innovation.

At the first outset the chairman is a Gandhian and he is aware of all the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. The chairman clearly spells out Gandhi's views on customer relationship. He sits in the factory outlet dealing with

wholesalers and retailers. Those distributors who come from far away places are provided with accommodation in the factory site. For which they have constructed a guest house that can provide accommodation to about hundred people at a time. The accommodation is provided at rates that will take care of the maintenance of the building and give the company no profit. It was very difficult to find a dissatisfied customer whether he is a retailer or the distributor. Those retailers who take the products from factory outlet get the same product at the same price as from any other outlets. No special discount to anybody and nobody is allowed to sell the product by reducing the fixed price. Customers go for products other than Popy only if it is not available, even though imported products is priced only half of that of Popy. It is not an exaggeration if it is said that kids of other small umbrella company owners go for Popy's latest products, as most of the times Popy comes out with something state of the art for kids.

Autonomy and entrepreneurship is one fact that Popy has nurtured the maximum in the company and is the one which took Popy to the new heights that one can see today. The main production unit is of hundred workers who basically do the training of new comers and new family unit members, quality checking of the raw materials and finished products, marketing of the products, design and promotion and R & D operations. For production of raw materials, the company depends either on the joint venture operations or on the units established abroad. Production and assembling is done in family units which work in nearby areas in the state of Kerala and are self managed. If these family units were clubbed together and were working under the same shelter, the company would have been very big and under the present political scenario in Kerala it could have been difficult for the chairman to take the company to the present level of excellence.

Like all excellent companies, Popy also consider its employees working in the main unit and family unit as their assets. The effort that one employee applied to form a union inside the company, was aborted by other employees of the organization. Without making the management even notice it or act on it, the employee was advised to quit the company by others. The senior most worker told that the act was done not out of fear of loss of their job, as they are able to get a job outside on their skill, but because of the value system the management keep and the empowerment they provide for workers. For the extra effort and productivity that the workers render, they don't get anything extra but at the time of need such as hospitalization of family members, education of their children or marriages of their daughters the company act at the patron's role by providing financial help and other facilities. Those wards of employees who could not proceed with their studies for reasons other than money problem, it is a company policy to provide them a job.

Popy is a value driven company, the value of quality and reliability of their products. Everybody in the company has a job to do and everybody does their job. Company mission statement states that the company strives for quality and innovation and through quality and innovation it strives for profit. Every one in the company and its family units know about this aspect of the company and they strive to match their actions to company mission. The chairman at his old age is of high level of positive energy for the company operations and the same gets transferred to his son and hence to the other employees. The skill level of the employees is so certain that company has a policy of not having a second's sale.

To the query that even after having registration for all the 34 items of products from pins to airplane, "why the company concentrates only on umbrella" the answer of the chairman and MD matched to the concept of "stick to knitting". All the experiments and innovation efforts are done only on umbrella and not for any other products. Paradigm preserving and paradigm stretching are the two modes of innovation where they are concentrating and even parts manufacturing they are not venturing because of the concept of stick to knitting.

Popy has achieved a good name in umbrella making in India and abroad, and they are not able to meet the demand in number to provide quality products. Computerization and automated manufacturing is not implemented in the family unit level as it might affect the quality and good name of the company. There is high demand for rain cots from bike travelers of Kerala. The chairman is of the opinion that rain cots are paradigm breaking innovation in the field of umbrella and they are not well knowledgeable about the production and marketing of rain cots. If the product could not succeed in the market then name of Popy would be tarnished. The tide that could be generated due to the failure of a new product in the market may take away the demand for old products also.

Span of control in Popy is designed as in the case of catholic system of hierarchy with five levels. The system in the company comprises of the chairman, the managing director, the department managers and workers and the system with family unit consist of the chairman, MD, department managers, family unit heads and family unit members. In the main units hundred workers and managers are under the control of chairman and managing director. The departments are divided among them as the chairman heads the marketing and finance and production and R&D and other departments are under the purview of the MD. This helps in improving the communication among the employees and between employees and the administrative staff. They use a flat system for hierarchy and minimum number of people in the managerial level.

It is interesting to note how the simultaneous loose and tight property of excellent companies is maintained in Popy. Popy is based mainly on the value of quality and reliability and the fact is known to the employees, the family unit members, customers, suppliers and to the administrative staff. There is no direct control on the way the family units produce its products but when they submit the finished products to the company an entry in the register is made as to which family unit the product belong to. And in turn in family units also they keep a register as to whom assembling and stitching belongs to. A unit number with a special ink is made on the umbrella which will take any body back to the source of the production unit in case a defect is detected in the marketed product. The system is seen as the best example of loose and tight property of an excellent company.

The strategy, the structure, the resources and partnership, HR policies, the process, customer care, employee care, business results and the corporate social responsibility etc (EFQM guidelines, 1999) of the company make it an excellent company. Popy has a market oriented strategy supported by creativity and innovation. Its structure is comparatively flat and amenable to changes. Its resources are obtained through joint venture and partnerships. Popy has adopted an HR policy that keeps away union out of the company in a state such as Kerala. It has a highly employee oriented process. Popy takes care of the customer and in return customers keep their loyalty to the company. In addition to a good package of remuneration employees are given helping hand in their time of urgent needs. Business result in terms of profitability is mentioned in their mission statement and they keep a quality value system to ensure it. Popy has a policy of helping the mentally retarded in the society, which shows its corporate social responsibility. With respect to other dimensions of excellence (Job and Bhattacharya, 2010) such as creativeness, innovativeness, efficiency, effectiveness, competitiveness, productiveness and profitability, Popy is showing that it as an excellent company. They achieved ISO and their specifications of umbrella remain the specifications of ISI. The number of awards and accolades they receive every year also indicate that the company is high performing and excellent. Above all Popy umbrella remain the second best product of the state of Kerala now, the first being milk produced by Milk Marketing Federation of Kerala (MILMA).

CONCLUSIONS

The case study on Popy Umbrella Mart was done to understand how an SME became successful in a State such as Kerala, which is well known for its literacy level and its affinity for communist philosophy; By the study it became clear that the chairman is a veteran in umbrella industry and the managing director is an expert in excellence principles and their combined effort made the success possible. In other words, Chairman's knowledge in Gandhiji's teachings complimented

by Managing Directors' know how in applying Peters and Waterman's principles of organisational excellence paved the way for Popy's high performance. There were examples to quote from Popy for all the eight principles depicted in the book "In search of excellence". They showed exceptional brilliance in applying family unit concept from China to satisfy the "self ownership" requirement of the people, developed as a part of communist culture. The study will give confidence to industrialists to overcome their reluctance to start industries in Kerala.

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