

Raging Social Media Firestorm at L&T India: A Case of Foot in the Mouth?

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Abstract. The case highlights the occurrence of a communication lapse by the leader of an Indian organisation, Larsen & Toubro (L&T), while responding to a question posed by an employee, which was leaked on a popular social media platform. The case explores the controversy over its Chairman, S.N. Subrahmanyam's, remarks on work culture in a town hall meeting, which sparked a social media backlash. His casual comment on preference for extended work hours, including Sundays, went viral, triggering debates on work-life balance. L&T, known for its high-performance culture, faced scrutiny as employees and industry professionals criticized unrealistic employee expectations. Social media was flooded with memes lampooning the chairman, forcing L&T's communication team into damage control. The incident underscores the risks of leadership communication in the digital age and the power of social media amplification. L&T's HR team and Subrahmanyam issued clarifications, reaffirming their commitment to employee well-being. The case was taught to first-term students of the course 'International Business Communication' (April-May 2025) in a one-year MBA Programme for Management Executives as a part of the course on International Business Communication.

Keywords: crisis, leadership communication, work life balance, apology.

1. Introduction

In Mumbai on the 7th of January, 2025, getting ready for an employee interaction, the Chairman of Larson and Toubro (L&T), S.N. Subrahmanyam, was mentally preparing what to say to the energetic pool of employees. Like his predecessor, he too believed in the power of hard work and long hours. After all, India had a lot to achieve even to be considered on a par with the Western world.

The meeting started well. Subrahmanyam welcomed the team and interacted with them graciously. Later on he was asked why L&T was still making its employees work on Saturdays. Subrahmanyam's reply was prompt:

"I regret that I am not able to make you work on Sundays. If I could make you work on Sundays, I would be happier, because I too work on Sundays. What do you do sitting at home? How long can you stare at your wife? Come on, get to the office and start working. I recently spoke with a manager from China who believes that his country can beat the United States of America. He claimed that Chinese people work 90 hours a week, while Americans work only 50 hours a

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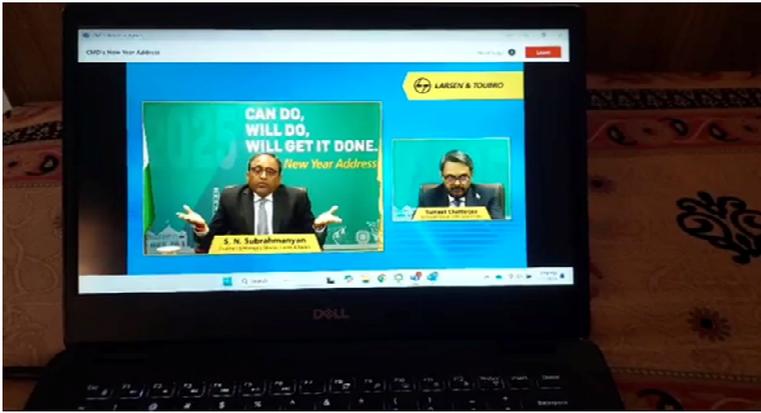
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week! So that is the answer for you. If you want to be on top of the world... You have to work 90 hours a week. Get going, guys. Come on.”

Exhibit-1: Video footage of the employee interaction with the CEO of L&T on Reddit



Shortly after the meeting, an undated footage surfaced on Reddit, a popular social media platform, where Subrahmanyam came under fire for his comments. Many L&T employees expressed outrage on social media platforms, criticizing the company’s expectations and work culture. Employees complained of the possibility of burnout and its effect on their mental and physical health. For example, one employee wrote:

“I was at that speech yesterday. Someone asked about sick leave procedures in L&T and why it was approved only if one fell sick for two days. Can anyone fall sick for only one day? I was taken aback when the Chairman retorted ‘Then don’t fall sick’.”

Another employee inquired as to the reason why lesser-paid individuals were expected to work the same duration as a CEO. Social media platforms were flooded with negative comments and hashtags, with many employees expressing their disapproval of L&T’s work culture. A few of the reactions on Reddit were as follows:

“I don’t care about competing with China. Let China become number one; it doesn’t make any difference to me. I just want to sit with my family and enjoy the limited amount of time I have here on earth with my loved ones.”

“That’s why the craze for government jobs is at its peak in India. Private sector is only good at harassing employees.”

“Even Narayan Murthy (Chairman of Infosys, a software company based in India) was saying 70 hours. This man is saying 90 hours...”