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RETHINKING AUTONOMY AT WORK



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Making Autonomy Work

T V Narendran is CEO & Managing Director, Tata Steel

Autonomy is usually discussed as a question of trust. Do we trust our people enough to let them decide? To my mind, 'trust' is personal and it does not scale. The more important questions are: which decisions should sit where, what does a person need in order to make those decisions well, and where do the boundaries lie?

A hazard is almost always seen first by the person working closest to it. If that person has to wait for the observation to travel up and the instruction to travel back, the hazard stays where it is for longer than it should

handful of people are allowed to decide?'

Autonomy is, in that sense, a design choice. It means giving people the authority to take a defined set of decisions, within clear limits, with accountability for what follows. Responsibility without authority creates frustration. Authority without accountability creates drift. When the two come, they create

This distinction particularly matters in large organisations. And having spent my entire career in a large organisation, a question I keep coming back to is 'how an organisation with tens of thousands of capable people can sometimes behave as though only a

ownership.

The clearest illustration of this, in my experience, is safety. A hazard is almost always seen first by the person working closest to it. If that person has to wait for the observation to travel up and the instruction to travel back, the hazard stays where it is for longer than it should. We ran a campaign built around a simple idea: find it, own it, fix it. The person who notices the problem owns it and is trusted to act on it. Safety improves when the authority to act sits where the observation happens.

The same principle applies to customers. Jan Carlzon, who led the turnaround of Scandinavian Airlines, wrote about moments of truth, the brief encounters in which a customer forms a view of an entire organisation. Those moments belong to the person handling them. How well they go depends a great deal on how much that person is permitted to decide without asking.

None of this argues against hierarchy or standards. For example, in a factory, some things cannot be left to individual judgement. Safety, critical quality parameters, regulatory obligations, financial controls etc. cannot depend on who happens to be on shift. But having clear standards does not mean that every decision has to be made centrally.

Standards should define what is non-negotiable and autonomy should give people the freedom to decide how best to achieve it.

When an organisation leans heavily on one person, the day is filled with decisions. As autonomy grows, the day fills instead with direction, standards, capability and the design of how decisions get made

The paradox is that discipline is what makes autonomy possible. A person can exercise judgement only when they know what normal looks like, what is non-negotiable, what information is available to them and when to escalate. Without that foundation, autonomy becomes an invitation to guess. The same applies to experimentation and innovation.

A large organisation needs people who are willing to try something different to improve yield, reduce energy consumption, solve a recurring problem or simply find a better way of doing something. And this requires some tolerance for failure. So there has to be a clear distinction between failing while trying to improve something and ignoring a standard that was meant to be followed.

If every unsuccessful experiment damages a reputation, people learn quickly that the safest course is to do nothing. Freedom to act without freedom to fail is a trap. Autonomy also depends on information. People cannot own an outcome when the information needed to understand it sits several layers above them. Technology has changed this considerably.

What an operator sees on a screen today would once have taken weeks of reporting to assemble.

There is another simple test I find useful for judging how much of this is real. How quickly does bad news travel? Good news moves easily. Bad news tends to soften as it climbs, and by the time it reaches the top, the problem has fewer options attached to it. If people hesitate before saying something uncomfortable, the issue lies in the culture rather than in the reporting system.

For leaders, all of this changes the nature of the work. When an organisation leans heavily on one person, the day is filled with decisions. As autonomy grows, the day fills instead with direction, standards, capability and the design of how decisions get made.

Organisations have far more decisions to take than any leadership team can hold. The people closest to the work often see things first and understand them better. Autonomy is how we connect what people know to what they are allowed to do. It becomes real only when leaders step back often enough for people to believe and make it part of the culture. **IM**

The opinion expressed is personal.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Autonomy has become one of the defining ideals of modern workplaces. We often assume that giving people greater freedom automatically leads to greater engagement, creativity, and performance. But autonomy, like most leadership practices, is not universally effective. Its value depends on the person, the work, and the circumstances.

Experienced employees who possess strong competence, understand the broader context, and have earned organisational trust can often do their best work when given room to decide, experiment, and execute. In creative, complex, or stable environments, excessive oversight can become an unnecessary constraint, limiting initiative rather than improving outcomes.

Yet autonomy can become counterproductive when the conditions for independent decision-making are absent. Someone who is new to a role may need direction before freedom. A team facing an unclear strategy may require alignment before discretion. In high-risk situations, tighter controls and clearer accountability may be essential. And when performance is falling short, coaching, structure, and closer feedback can provide the support needed to recover.

This suggests that effective leadership is less about choosing between control and freedom and more about knowing when each is appropriate. The strongest leaders diagnose before they delegate. They understand that autonomy is not a reward to be distributed equally, but a management lever to be adjusted thoughtfully.

The real question, then, is not “How much autonomy should employees have?” but “What does this person and this situation require right now?” That shift—from ideology to judgment—can make autonomy a powerful tool for both individual growth and organisational performance.

Do write in with your views to imeditorial@spentamultimedia.com

Maneck Davar
Maneck Davar

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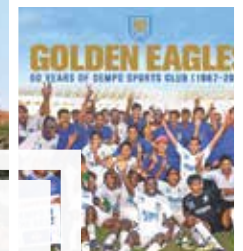
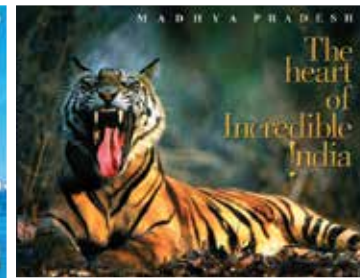
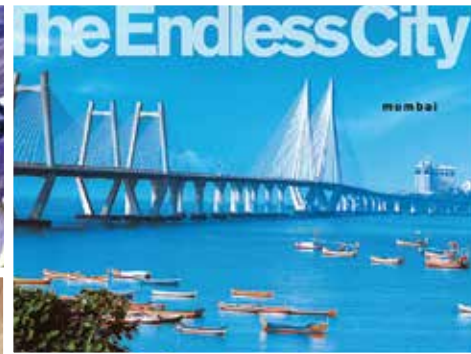
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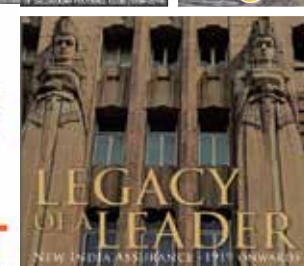
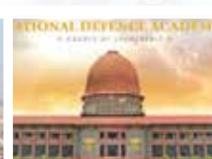
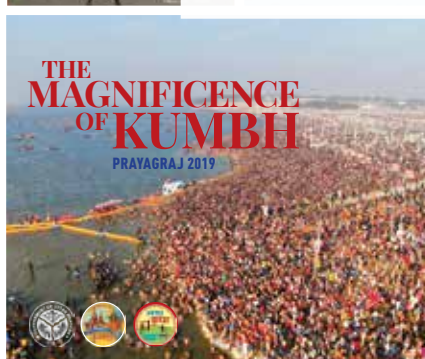
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THE AUTONOMY TRAP





Armaan Hoyvay

Overmanaging talent

Autonomy isn't a one-size-fits-all solution—it works best when leaders match the level of freedom to the person, task and context.

♦ JULIAN LIGHTON, AUTHOR, *NAVIGATING YOUR NEXT*



One of the most persistent myths in modern management is that autonomy always improves performance. Give people freedom, and they'll flourish. This is dangerously oversimplified.

Over three decades of working with

leadership teams across venture-backed startups, PE portfolio companies and Fortune 500 enterprises—including extensive work as an executive and team coach—I have learned that the autonomy question isn't binary. The real question isn't whether to give autonomy, but when, to whom, and in what form.

Leaders of high-performing organisations understand this nuance.

The autonomy paradox

Here's what makes this tricky: the same person needs different levels of autonomy at different times, in different contexts, doing different work.

I watched this play out dramatically when working with a SaaS company scaling from \$50 million to \$200 million revenue. Their VP of Sales initially thrived with autonomy, building the team and in the go-to-market motion. Now, she was struggling in the new environment—facing enterprise deals with nine-month sales cycles, complex procurement processes, and sophisticated competitive dynamics.

Her CEO, believing in autonomy as a universal principle, stayed hands-off. "I hired her because she is talented. I need to trust her." Meanwhile, she was drowning. What she needed wasn't freedom—she needed coaching, frameworks and collaborative problem-solving until she developed expertise in this new domain.

The lesson: autonomy without competence isn't empowerment. It is abandonment.

This is what researchers call the competence-autonomy relationship, and it's not linear.

When autonomy accelerates performance

Let us start with when autonomy works—because it does work, powerfully, under the right conditions.

■ High competence in stable domains

When someone has deep expertise in their domain and the environment isn't changing dramatically, autonomy unleashes performance. I've seen this repeatedly with senior technical leaders who know their craft and understand the landscape.

Your job as a leader is to give them context, resources, strategic direction, then get out of their way.

When I worked with a Fortune 100 software company on redesigning their global sales strategy, the best performing region had a leader who'd been in enterprise software sales for 20 years. The CRO's role wasn't to manage his execution, it was to ensure he understood corporate strategy, had the resources he needed, and could adapt global frameworks to his regional reality.

■ Creative and innovation work

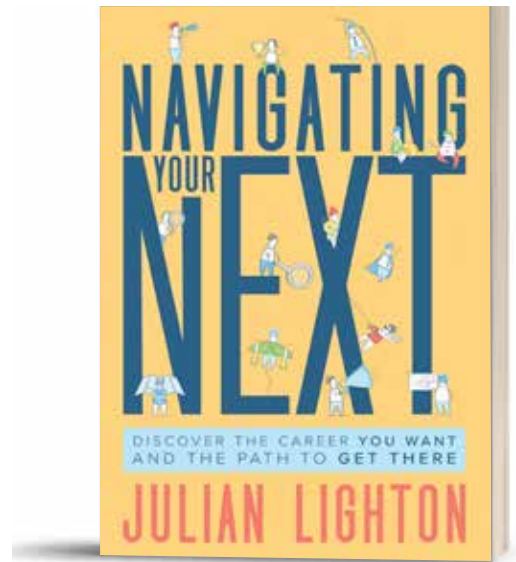
Work that requires creativity, innovation, or novel problem-solving demands autonomy. You can't micromanage someone into breakthrough thinking. Intrinsic motivation—which autonomy supports—drives creative performance far more effectively than external control.

I've applied this principle extensively in my work with EdTech companies developing new learning products. The product teams that produced the most innovative solutions had leaders who set clear criteria (what problem we're solving, who we're serving, what resources are available, when we need decisions) but left the how to the team. The teams that struggled had leaders who specified not just the what but the how—undermining ownership and killing creative problem-solving.

■ When strategic context is clear

Autonomy works beautifully when people understand the strategic context and can make decisions aligned with organisational priorities. This is why strategic clarity is so essential.

I worked with a gaming company where the CEO established three clear strategic filters: Does this serve our core player community?



Does this differentiate us from competitors?
Does this create sustainable revenue?
With this clarity, team leads could make autonomous decisions about features, partnerships, and resource allocation without constant executive approval. Autonomy worked because strategy was clear.

■ High-trust relationships

Autonomy flourishes in high-trust environments where leaders have their employees' backs, mistakes are learning opportunities rather than career-limiting events, and there's psychological safety to take intelligent risks.

Paradoxically, this trust isn't built through hands-off management but engaged leadership early in relationships—where you demonstrate competence, show you care about people's success, and prove you'll support them when things get difficult. Once trust is established, autonomy accelerates performance. Without it, autonomy feels like neglect.

When autonomy undermines performance

Now let's examine the other side—when autonomy damages effectiveness and tighter management creates better outcomes.

- **Learning new capabilities:** When someone is learning something genuinely new—new market, new technology, new business model—autonomy without support sets them up for failure. I saw this pattern clearly with the VP of Sales I mentioned earlier. She knew how to lead in the previous context but didn't understand the new customer dynamics, buying processes, or competitive landscape.

What this leader needed wasn't autonomy. She needed active onboarding: time with the CEO understanding strategy, exposure to customers, coaching on industry-specific dynamics, and close collaboration on early decisions until they built contextual competence.

The management principle here is simple: the less someone knows about a specific context, the more structure and support they need. This accelerates their learning curve so they can eventually operate autonomously.

- **Unclear strategy or changing direction:** When organisational strategy is unclear, or shifting rapidly, autonomy creates divergent execution that wastes resources and creates misalignment. Sales invest in one market segment while product builds for another. Marketing positions the brand one way while the CEO describes the strategy differently to investors. In this instance, the solution isn't more autonomy, it's more alignment.

- **High-risk decisions or contexts:** Some decisions and contexts carry too much risk



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for autonomous execution—not because people aren't talented, but because the consequences of mistakes are severe or irreversible. In M&A transactions, some moments require close management—due diligence findings that could kill a deal, negotiation points, integration decisions affecting hundreds of employees—these all require centralised decision-making with CEO and board involvement. Similarly, in situations with significant legal, financial, or reputational risk, tighter management isn't micromanagement—it's appropriate governance.

The situational leadership framework for performance problems

When someone is underperforming, autonomy rarely fixes the problem. In fact, it usually makes things worse. Performance problems require closer management: clearer expectations, more frequent check-ins, specific feedback, measurable milestones and accountability.

The practical answer to the question of autonomy is situational leadership: diagnosing

what's causing underperformance (lack of skill, unclear expectations, poor fit etc.) and adapting your management approach based on the specific person, task and context.

I use a simple framework with leadership teams:

■ **Assess competence and commitment:**

Where is this person on the competence curve? Do they have the skills and knowledge needed? And what is their commitment level – are they motivated and confident, or uncertain and anxious?

- **Match your management style:** High competence + high commitment = delegate and give autonomy. Low competence but high commitment = coach and teach actively. High competence but wavering commitment = reconnect to purpose and remove obstacles. Low competence and low commitment = provide clear direction or consider whether this is the right fit.

- **Adjust as situations change:** The same person needs different management approaches for different responsibilities as contexts evolve. Your star performer taking on a new challenge needs more support. Your struggling team member who's finally gaining traction can handle more autonomy.

The leadership skill: Reading the situation

Reading the situation accurately and overcoming your natural management tendencies is hard.

Some leaders default to control—they over-manage everyone regardless of competence, driven by anxiety or a need for certainty. This drives talented people away and prevents capable team members from developing.

Other leaders default to under-managing everyone, either because they are conflict-avoidant, overextended, or ideologically committed to autonomy. This leaves people

without the support they need and allows performance problems to metastasise.

The best leaders manage situationally. This requires honest self-assessment: What's my default tendency? When do I over-manage and when do I under-manage?

Practical application

If you are a leader wondering whether you are over-managing or under-managing specific team members, ask yourself:

- **For potential over-management:** Does this person have demonstrated competence in this domain? Have they successfully handled similar challenges before? Am I inserting myself because they actually need help, or because I'm anxious, or struggling to let go?

- **For potential under-management:** Does this person have the knowledge and skills this situation requires? Are they asking for more support or showing signs of struggle? Am I giving them space because they've earned it, or because I'm avoiding difficult conversations or too busy?

The answers will tell you whether you need to adjust your approach.

The bottom line

Autonomy isn't good or bad. It is a management tool that works brilliantly in some contexts and fails miserably in others.

The leaders who build high-performing organisations develop the judgment to know when each approach serves performance, the self-awareness to recognise their natural biases, and the discipline to manage situationally even when it's uncomfortable.

Get this right, and you'll build teams where talented people thrive, struggling performers get support, and everyone receives the management approach they need to succeed. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julian Lighton is author, *Navigating Your Next: Discover the Career You Want and the Path to Get There*.

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ESOPs are emerging as a powerful strategic tool for Indian companies to attract and retain talent, align employees with long-term growth, and turn workers into stakeholders in the wealth they help create.

♦ RAMESH KOTNANA, INDIAN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, HYDERABAD

HR

A stake in success

Securing talented individuals has become much more difficult than simply hiring; retaining or attracting skilled talent across fields is also significantly harder. One approach that has garnered attention in these industries over the past few years is Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs), which foster employee loyalty and help employees develop a stronger bond with the company. As companies look for ways to differentiate themselves from their competition, ESOPs can be an effective tool, as they represent a substantial ‘magnet’ and represent not only a ‘benefit’, but also a ‘strategic tool’ that can engage, retain and motivate the very best and most sought-after workers in their respective industry.

While ESOPs have always been associated with rewarding and providing ownership interests to a single executive-level employee, they are now viewed as a tool for retaining employees at all levels throughout the organisation, across all types of businesses (startups, unicorns and established IT Companies). By providing employees with an ownership interest in the organisation, ESOPs accomplish several things for the employer:

they reward employees for their performance through stock grants, foster a sense of belonging to the organisation, and create a long-term commitment.

The concept of employee ownership is not new. The first ESOP¹ was created in 1956 by American lawyer and economist Louis O. Kelso to facilitate the transfer of ownership of Peninsula Newspapers to its employees and managers. Since then, ESOPs have evolved into one of the most influential compensation and wealth-creation mechanisms across industries.

The total value of the ESOP buybacks² by Indian startups since 2020 is now nearly \$2 billion. As the buying and selling of ESOPs have increased significantly over recent years, the volume of buybacks has also risen sharply. In 2025 alone, 12 Indian startups³ conducted ESOP buybacks for approximately 9,000 employees, creating over \$158 million in wealth for those employees. The creation of wealth for employees⁴ continued to be a primary consideration of many startups through 2025, as evidenced by Rapido completing its first-ever ESOP liquidity event for current and former employees this past February, PhonePe purchased back over ₹700 crore to ₹800 crore worth of ESOPs in September, and Flipkart

conducted a buyback of approximately \$50 million of ESOPs this past November.

Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy⁵ (CMIE) shows that Indian listed companies spent nearly ₹15000 million on ESOP schemes during FY 25 (ending March 31, 2025), demonstrating staggering growth in the numbers and the strategic significance of ESOPs within businesses. ESOP expenses rose 30 per cent in FY25, up from a 19 per cent increase in the previous year.

Recently, manufacturing giant Vedanta Ltd⁶ has provided approximately ₹2500 million to its employees through ESOP schemes, a substantial amount compared with similarly sized companies, making it one of the largest broad-based equity distributions in India's manufacturing sector. Vedanta Ltd issued over ₹500 million (500 million shares) under the ESOP 2025, the Last financial year (FY25). Approximately 1,200 employees participated; the majority being new and first-time ESOP recipients, including 200 fresh graduates.

Even the Economic Survey 2020⁷ has proposed skin in the game for public sector bank (PSB) employees through an ESOP. "Ownership by motivated, capable employees across all levels in the organisation could give such employees tangible financial rewards for value enhancement, align their incentives with what is beneficial to the PSB, and create a mindset of enterprise ownership for employees." "This would enable employees to become owners in the banks and incentivise them to embrace risk-taking and innovation continually," the Survey said.

The funding boom in the country has put a lot of money in the hands of founders, turning 41 startups into unicorns in 2021, compared to just 11 in the whole of last year. Around 40 unicorns (in the past few years) announced ESOPs so far, and some of these moves signal a measure of generosity that did not exist in the startup

ecosystem until recently and is a manifestation of the funding boom and skills shortage.

An analysis⁸ (2016) of French Companies Listed on the SBF 250 reveals that employee share ownership enhances employees' job satisfaction and organisational commitment. The study finds that becoming shareholders shows employees' confidence in the firm's future. This confidence raises many positive attitudes, such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and commitment to the company.

A meta-analysis⁹ (2016) of 102 studies with 56,984 firms from around the world found a small but significant positive relationship, on average, between employee stock ownership and firm performance. Employee ownership has a small but positive, statistically significant relation to firm performance.

Over the past 50 years, ESOPs¹⁰ (2010) have facilitated orderly ownership succession programs for tens of thousands of business owners. During this time, the ESOP has also created unanticipated wealth, economic security, and consumer purchasing power for the many millions of employees who have been fortunate enough to work for employee-owned companies.

A study¹¹ (1987) found that worker ownership and participation have real advantages. There is a strong correlation between corporate performance and worker participation: ESOP companies do best when they set up programs that permit workers to have a say in corporate policy.

Today, India is witnessing its own ESOP revolution.

ESOPs move beyond founders and senior executives

For years, stock options were primarily offered to founders, C-suite and other senior leaders, and a handful of early employees. That picture has changed drastically.

In the last few years, many Indian unicorns¹², as well as other startups¹³, have expanded ESOP benefits to employees across levels and functions. Companies are increasingly recognising that business growth is driven not solely by leadership teams but also by engineers, sales professionals, operations teams, delivery personnel, and customer support staff.

In 2021, e-commerce unicorn Meesho introduced MeeSOP¹⁴, an employee stock option programme that allowed every full-time employee, regardless of designation or tenure, to participate in the wealth creation. Continuing its earlier commitment, Meesho¹⁵ allotted 95 lakh equity shares to its eligible employees in April 2026. Recently, logistics unicorn Delhivery¹⁶ granted 1,00,360 stock options to eligible employees through its Employee Stock Option Plan 2012.

Indian companies are competing aggressively for talent through ESOPs

The market for technology talent in the country remains highly competitive, as Indian companies are battling not only with the domestic rivals but also multinational corporations, global capability centres, and remote-first international employers. Not only leading companies¹⁷ such as Reliance, HDFC, Bajaj Auto, Infosys, and TCS, but also small- and mid-tier tech companies and startups¹⁸ are offering ESOPs to eligible employees to retain or attract talent.

This trend coincides with the rapid rise of India's startup economy. The country has become one of the world's largest startup ecosystems¹⁹, with thousands of recognised startups and a growing number of unicorns. As a result, startups are experimenting with innovative ESOP structures.

Lucious²⁰ introduced an "Everyday Vesting, Anytime Liquidation" programme in 2021,



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allowing employees to vest their ESOPs daily and liquidate them after a one-year lock-in period. Such flexibility was almost unheard of in the Indian startup ecosystem a decade ago.

The growth in venture capital funding and technology adoption has enabled startups to share wealth more broadly with employees, making ESOPs an important component of compensation packages.

The rise of employee millionaires

Employees with the ESOPs stood to gain significantly from their companies' public listings and ESOP programmes. Perhaps the strongest advertisement for ESOPs has been the success stories emerging from Indian technology companies that went public.

For example, when Freshworks²¹ became the first Indian software-as-a-service (SaaS) company to list on Nasdaq in 2021, hundreds of employees became millionaires in rupees. Likewise, when Swiggy²² went public in 2024, 500 employees became millionaires, and when Paytm went IPO in November 2021, around 350 employees, both current and former, became *crorepatis* through ESOPs.

Rather than being seen as an undefined financial instrument, ESOPs are increasingly

Companies should also pay attention to the design of their plans, as overly complex designs or generous grants could make employees less likely to participate

regarded as a viable means of generating wealth, especially early in their careers, when young professionals join growth-oriented companies. Companies are using ESOPs to keep their workforce engaged amid today's intense competition and accelerated growth. Many companies are offering ESOPs so that employees feel a founder's

emotional attachment to the long-term success of the businesses they participate in.

Why companies are investing in ESOPs

The popularity of ESOPs is not driven solely by employee demand. Employee ownership may also benefit companies. According to the National Centre for Employee Ownership²³ (NCEO), employee-owned companies have historically demonstrated stronger job growth and higher productivity than conventionally owned firms. ESOP companies register 25 per cent greater job growth over 10 years than similar companies with conventional ownership; they also see an average yearly increase in return on assets of 2.7 percentage points. Productivity improves by 4 per cent to 5 per cent in the first year after adopting an ESOP. Also, companies with employee stock ownership plans report significantly higher sales growth and higher revenue per employee than do conventionally owned companies in the same industry.

A study²⁴ by the Employee Ownership Foundation found that organisations with employee ownership roles are less likely to terminate employees during economic downturn. When employees work at these businesses, they usually have a higher level of commitment to the organisation because of their involvement in its financial success. A Rutgers University study²⁵ found that employee-owned firms were more optimistic

about the post-pandemic recovery and placed greater emphasis on preserving employee skills, customer relationships, and workplace culture. These studies reveal that when employees become owners, their incentives align more closely with those of the organisation.

Innovation and employee ownership

Research suggests that ESOPs also promote innovation. A study published in the *Open Journal of Accounting*²⁶ examined the impact of employee stock ownership plans on Chinese companies and found that firms adopting ESOPs experienced improvements in innovation output and profitability. The research found that employee ownership encourages individuals to think beyond short-term goals and focus on long-term value creation. Employees who hold shares are more likely to contribute ideas, embrace innovation, and take ownership of organisational outcomes.

Challenges and the road ahead

While ESOPs are becoming popular, many employees do not understand vesting schedules or the tax implications of cashing out their ESOP shares when share prices fluctuate. Many employees are unaware of the regulatory issues involved in establishing an ESOP.

Therefore, companies have a responsibility to provide education about financial management and planning. Companies should also pay attention to the design of their plans, as overly complex designs or generous grants could make employees less likely to participate. Companies need to clearly communicate the challenges and issues associated with their ESOP schemes.

In India, ESOP taxation²⁷ is a big problem because employees are taxed when they exercise their options, rather than when they can actually realise any profits. However, newly listed technology companies like Groww and PhysicsWallah²⁸ are increasingly facing scrutiny from institutions regarding their ESOP plans,

with institutions concerned about shareholder dilution, the identities of the beneficiaries, and the adequacy of the disclosures, according to experts in corporate governance.

One of the main features of ESOPs is that employees will feel a sense of ownership, beyond what they would normally experience through an employment remuneration scheme. By becoming shareholders in their company, employees can be considered more than just employees; they now have a partnership with the company and a vested interest in its performance and growth. Since the financial future of each employee depends on the growth of their employer, they have a strong emotional and financial commitment to the success of their businesses.

As India's economy continues to grow, it is clear that ESOPs will remain an established part of organisations' compensation strategies, regardless of size. Companies recognise that sharing ownership not only provides employees with additional remuneration but also is a key strategic investment in creating enterprises that are innovative, long-lasting, and committed.

Ultimately, the success of ESOPs will be determined not only by the wealth they generate for both the company and employees, but also by the culture of shared purpose. ESOPs provide companies and employees with a number of intangible benefits. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

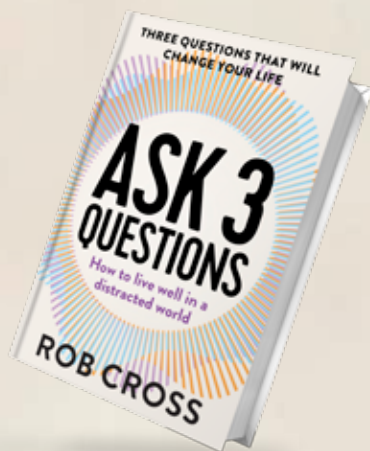
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Recommended reads



ASK 3 QUESTIONS

Authors: Rob Cross
Publisher: Whitefox Publishing

This book is a guide for any leaders and managers who want to progress professionally without losing sight of what really makes a career meaningful. At a time when greater responsibility can easily become synonymous with longer hours and constant distraction, the author encourages readers to pause and ask: Who am I? Why am I here? How will I live? For managers preparing for their next career step, its central message is valuable: advancement matters, but knowing what you are advancing towards matters more.



HUMANCORPS

Authors: Andrew Lepianowski and Mike Pino
Publisher: Routledge

This book argues that truly sustainable performance can only be achieved if we redesign systems around human capability, rather than simply trying to extract more from them. Its HumanCorps model combines case studies, expert perspectives, and practical strategies, while the concept of 'Synthetic Symbiosis' explores how humans and AI can work together to strengthen organisational performance. For senior managers and transformation leaders navigating AI and accelerating change, this is a valuable guide to building more resilient, human-centred organisations that are fit for the future.



IT STARTS WITH YOU

Author: Sara Bell
Publisher: -

If you find yourself struggling with navigating pressure, uncertainty, and the demands of leadership at work, this is a really helpful guide. The author draws upon her own personal experience as a successful business leader to argue that effective change only happens when we first learn to govern our own minds. Sara Bell's practical approach focuses creating space between a trigger and our response, helping readers to develop skills that will strengthen judgement, resilience and relationships at work.

For managers seeking greater self-awareness and a more intentional leadership mindset, it accessible, thought-provoking and powerful.



BURN BRIGHT, BUILD SLOW

Author: Sandhya Sabapathy
Publisher: Epic Author Publishing

The author argues that good intentions and ambitious commitments achieve very little when the systems, incentives and structures around them remain unchanged. This helps make a compelling case, and a helpful guide, for any managers who want to make meaningful change from inside large organisations.

For managers frustrated by corporate silos or sustainability initiatives that struggle to gain traction, the book offers a new way to understand where change gets stuck, and how to challenge the architecture behind it. Its central message is: changing what an organisation rewards matters more than changing what it says. It is an entertaining and thought-provoking read for managers ready to turn sustainability ambition into lasting organisational change.



THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION

Author: Dr John Briffa
Publisher: Pinnacle Press

Organisations and leaders alike around the world are facing up to the growing costs of workplace fatigue, stress, and burnout. The author challenges the assumption that better performance simply means optimising how we work, and organisations should instead optimise the worker.

Drawing on medical expertise, research and more than 30 years advising businesses, he covers emotional regulation, energy, environmental design, and execution. The advice is practical enough for time-poor professionals, with strategies that can be applied immediately to improve focus, resilience and sustainable productivity.



THE AI STRATEGY PLAYBOOK

Author: René Bohnsack
Publisher: Routledge

If you recognise AI's importance but are unsure how to move beyond experimentation, this could be the book you need. Rather than treating AI as a technical project, René Bohnsack frames it as a leadership and organisational challenge, showing how to build the skills, strategy, transformation capability and governance needed to turn technology into lasting value.



THE EXECUTIVE EDGE

Author: Ramesh Bairi
Publisher: Adhyayan Books

This is a practical playbook for leaders navigating disruption, digital transformation, and an uncertain business landscape. It bridges leadership theory with real-world executive challenges. It offers practical frameworks for making high-stakes decisions, inspiring teams, building resilience and leading change—including four “AI Stacks” to help organisations move from isolated AI pilots to meaningful integration. Combining strategic insight with actionable tools, it is designed for aspiring leaders, senior executives, entrepreneurs and business students seeking to strengthen their leadership capabilities and build a lasting legacy.



Marc D Kirshbaum, author, *The Eleven Primal Spaces: Awakening Next-Level Leadership By Reconnecting To What Makes Us Human*, opines that rethinking leadership through the human qualities that make strategy, trust and performance endure.

**MYTH
BUSTER**

Leadership, beyond strategy

In boardrooms, business schools, and management circles, leadership is still too often discussed as if it were primarily a matter of strategy, execution, and technical competence. Those things matter. They always will. But they are not the whole story, and in many cases, they are not even the deepest story.

In my experience advising organisations through growth, reinvention, and disruption, the leaders who create lasting impact are not just sharper strategists. They are better stewards of the human conditions that make strategy executable in the first place.

That is where many modern leadership myths begin to break down.

MYTH 1: LEADERSHIP IS ALL ABOUT STRATEGY AND EXECUTION.

This is perhaps the most persistent myth in management. Strategy and execution are essential. But neither stands on its own. Before people execute, they decide whether they trust the leader. Before teams align, they decide whether they share a purpose. Before organisations adapt, individuals decide whether they feel safe enough to think, speak, and act clearly under pressure.

In other words, execution rests on human foundations. Leaders who focus only on plans, targets, and operating rhythms often discover that

the organisation looks sound on paper but feels brittle in practice. Meetings become performative. Information gets filtered. Initiative narrows. People comply, but they do not fully commit.

What sustains performance is something deeper: awareness, belief, resilience, community, and trust. These are foundational human spaces that shape how people show up, connect, and create together. The myth is not that strategy and execution matter too much. It is that strategy and execution matter by themselves. They do not.

MYTH 2: TRUST IS SOFT.

Trust is often treated as an abstract virtue that is nice to have, hard to measure, and secondary to “real” business levers. That is a costly mistake.

Trust is an operational asset. It affects the speed of decision-making, the honesty of communication, the willingness to raise risks early, and the confidence with which people collaborate across functions. When trust is high, teams move faster because they spend less energy protecting themselves. When trust is low, politics expand to fill the vacuum.

Trust is the invisible bond that transforms strangers into allies. It is built through vulnerability, consistency, transparency, and

genuine care for others. As Laozi is quoted as saying, “He who does not trust enough will not be trusted.”

The business implications are direct. In low-trust cultures, people hedge. They delay. They conceal. They second-guess motives. In high-trust cultures, candor improves, alignment deepens, and accountability becomes more natural because people believe commitments mean something. Trust is not soft. It is structural.

MYTH 3: RESILIENCE IS JUST TOUGHNESS.

Many leaders still think of resilience as stoicism: absorb pressure, suppress emotion, keep moving. That version of resilience is incomplete and often unsustainable.

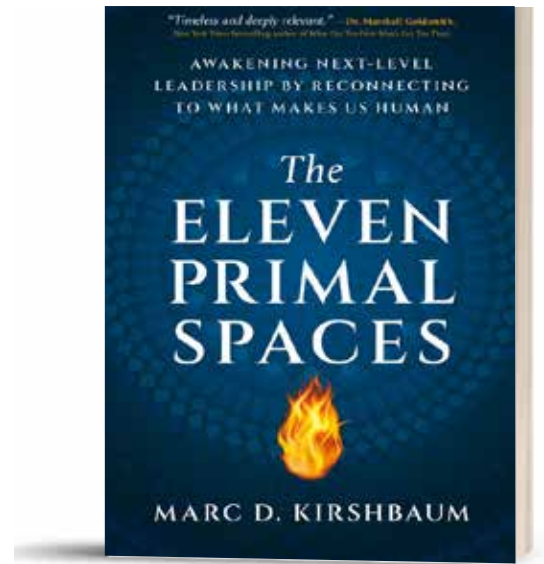
Real resilience includes reflection, adaptation, meaning-making, and renewal. It is not simply the ability to endure hardship. It is the ability to be shaped by hardship without being diminished by it.

Resilience is more than a trait; it becomes an enduring spirit shaped by how leaders reflect on obstacles, honour struggle, and celebrate perseverance, not just success.

This distinction matters. Leaders who pride themselves on toughness alone may project strength while becoming increasingly rigid, exhausted, or inaccessible. Truly resilient leaders, by contrast, learn, adapt, and recover.

I am reminded of John Chambers, former CEO of Cisco Systems, who at a Bring Your Child to Work Day, watched a child struggling to read a question aloud. Chambers walked over to the girl, put his arm around her, told her everything was okay, then shared that he, too, was dyslexic. That is resilience in action: not hardness, but the strength to confront human challenges that are part of making us who we are.

Organisations need this model now more than ever. In volatile environments, the



question is not whether challenges will come. They will. The question is whether leaders have built the inner capacity to metabolise pressure in a way that strengthens judgment instead of distorting it. Resilience is not hardening. It is becoming stronger without becoming less human.

MYTH 4: MORE INFORMATION PRODUCES BETTER LEADERSHIP.

We live in an age of dashboards, alerts, analytics, and endless digital inputs. Leaders are surrounded by more information than any generation before them. Yet many feel less clear, not more. That is because information is not the same as discernment.

Without reflection, leaders do not gain wisdom from more data; they often gain noise. They react instead of perceive. They confuse activity with clarity. They become more connected to signals and less connected to themselves.

Awareness is where leadership begins. It is where a leader pauses, notices, and honours the miracle of their own existence. It is the starting

point for how leaders show up, make decisions, and influence others.

That may sound philosophical, but it is deeply practical. Leaders who do not create reflective space often lose contact with their own values, distort their priorities, and make decisions from agitation rather than grounded judgment.

More information is useful only if a leader has the awareness to interpret it wisely.

The leaders who matter most in turbulent times are rarely the ones consuming the most inputs. They are the ones capable of pausing long enough to distinguish signal from noise.

MYTH 5: CONFLICT IS BAD.

Many organisations still behave as if the absence of conflict is proof of health. Usually, it is proof of caution.

Healthy conflict is one of the clearest indicators of organisational maturity. If people can challenge assumptions, name tensions, and surface difficult truths without fear of humiliation or retaliation, the organisation can learn in real time. If they cannot, silence begins to masquerade as alignment.



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Conflict is the crucible of growth. Leaders who welcome healthy conflict emphasise open, respectful, and constructive engagement, supported by explicit rules of engagement such as assuming positive intent, focusing on ideas rather than personalities, and seeking common ground before solutions.

This is where empathy becomes indispensable. Empathy is not indulgence. It is the disciplined practice of recognising and honouring the experiences of others by listening deeply, validating diverse perspectives, and responding with care. It shapes the emotional climate of a team by helping people feel seen, valued, and supported, even during disagreement.

Conflict without empathy becomes combat. Empathy without conflict becomes avoidance. Great leaders need both. They create environments where tension can be refined into insight instead of suppressed into resentment. The goal is not to eliminate conflict. The goal is to make it meaningful.

Each of these myths tempts leaders to focus on surfaces: plans without trust, speed without reflection, toughness without renewal, harmony without candour, data without discernment.

But enduring leadership is built below the surface. The future will not belong only to leaders who know the most, automate the fastest, or scale the quickest. It will belong to leaders who reconnect to what makes us human and build organisations on that foundation.

The most effective leaders in the years ahead will still care about execution. They will still pursue performance. But they will understand that the strongest organisations are held together not only by systems and incentives, but by human architecture, including awareness, resilience, community, trust, conflict, and empathy.

Bust those myths, and leadership becomes stronger, more human, and more enduring. 



For accomplished leaders, the next chapter is about transforming experience into authority—and authority into significance.

♦ ADAM WITTY, AUTHOR, *THE AUTHORITY ADVANTAGE* AND LUCY MCCARRAHER, FORBES BOOKS UK

LEADERSHIP

From success to significance

For much of our professional lives, leadership is measured by achievement. We build businesses, lead organisations, grow markets, create wealth, solve problems and deliver results. Success has visible milestones: promotions, acquisitions, market share, profitability, innovation and influence. These are the markers by which accomplished leaders are recognised.

Yet there comes a point in many successful careers when the nature of leadership begins to change. It isn't because ambition disappears. It isn't because there is nothing left to achieve—in many cases, leaders are running larger organisations than ever before, serving on influential boards, investing in new ventures or shaping industries at the highest level.

What changes is the question they begin asking themselves. Instead of asking, "How do I achieve more?", they begin asking, "What do I do with everything I've learned?" We believe this is becoming one of the defining leadership questions of our time. Every accomplished career creates something far more valuable than

financial success. It creates experience.

Experience is created from years of making difficult decisions; leading people through uncertainty; recovering from failure; recognising opportunities before others see them. Then there's building organisations, cultures and relationships—learning not only what works, but why it works.

Experience is one of the few assets that cannot be delegated, downloaded or generated by artificial intelligence. It is earned over decades. But experience alone is not enough. Experience becomes authority.

This is not simply the authority that comes with a title or position, but the authority that comes from judgement. The kind of authority that causes people to seek your advice, trust your perspective and value your experience because they know it has been tested in the real world.

Authority is one of the greatest assets an accomplished leader possesses. The question is: what do you do with it?

Some leaders continue using that authority solely within the organisations they lead. Others begin using it more broadly. They

mentor future leaders. They advise boards. They invest in entrepreneurs. They champion important causes. They teach. They speak. They write. They help shape industries rather than simply operate within them. This is what we call 'The Significance Shift'. It is the evolution from building success to creating significance.

Experience becomes Authority. Authority creates Significance. This shift is not confined to one type of leader. The experienced corporate executive who has spent three decades leading international teams may begin wondering how to pass on what they have learned to the next generation.

The recognised expert—a consultant, scientist, academic or specialist—may realise that their greatest contribution is no longer simply solving problems for individual clients but helping to shape the thinking of an entire profession.

The visionary entrepreneur may still be building companies but increasingly recognises that the ideas behind those businesses may ultimately prove more influential than the businesses themselves.

Different careers. Different journeys. The same question. How can everything I've learned become something that benefits others?

Four ways authority creates significance

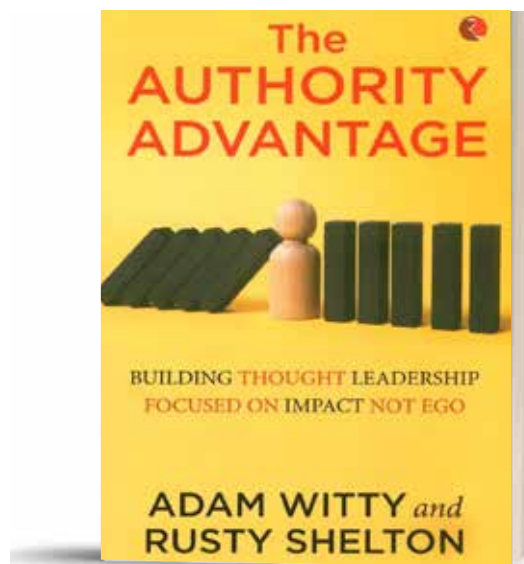
Recognising authority is only the beginning. The real question is how leaders convert that authority into lasting impact. There is no single path. In fact, the most significant leaders rarely limit themselves to one form of contribution. Instead, they find ways to multiply the value of their experience.

The first is through people. Coaching, mentoring and developing future leaders may not generate headlines, but they often create the greatest long-term impact. Every experienced executive can point to someone who recognised their potential early in their



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career. Becoming that person for someone else is one of the most powerful expressions of leadership.

The second is through organisations. Many accomplished executives move into non-executive directorships, advisory boards or governance roles. Their value is no longer measured by operational expertise alone, but by judgement. They have seen enough to recognise patterns, anticipate risks and ask the questions others may overlook.

The third is through ideas. Every industry benefits from people who challenge assumptions, share new thinking and shape professional debate. Some leaders do this through keynote speeches, others through research, articles or teaching. Increasingly, they also do it by writing books that distil decades of experience into ideas that can influence thousands of people they will never meet.

Finally, significance grows through legacy. This is not about retirement; it is about ensuring that the knowledge built over a

lifetime continues creating value long after today's business challenges have passed. The most enduring leaders leave behind more than successful organisations. They leave principles, ideas and ways of thinking that continue guiding others.

These approaches are different, but they have one thing in common: they allow authority to travel.

Authority in action

This evolution is already visible among many accomplished business leaders. One example is Raj Ananthanpillai, founder and CEO of Trua. After building and scaling several successful technology companies, Raj had already established himself as a leading authority on digital trust, identity and privacy. His work had influenced government agencies, major corporations and national security programmes. His authority was unquestioned.

Raj could easily have built another technology venture; instead, he chose to broaden his contribution. His Forbes book, *The Trust Crisis*, takes decades of specialist knowledge and makes it accessible to a much wider audience. At a time when artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and digital identity are reshaping business and society, Raj argues that the real challenge is not careless consumers but outdated systems that force individuals to surrender control of their personal information. More importantly, he presents a practical alternative built around privacy-first digital credentials.

Whether readers work in technology or not is almost beside the point. What matters is the pattern.

Raj recognised that the authority he had earned over decades could have greater impact if it moved beyond his own business. His experience became ideas that can inform

boardrooms, influence policymakers and help shape the future of an entire sector.

The multiplication effect

One of the most important questions every accomplished leader should ask is this: How many people benefit from what I know?

Within an organisation, even exceptional leaders inevitably have a finite reach. They influence colleagues, employees, customers and stakeholders. But when knowledge is deliberately shared, its impact multiplies. An idea can inspire a founder on another continent. A principle can help a young manager make a difficult decision. A story of failure can save another organisation from making the same costly mistake.

The influence of experience is no longer limited by geography, hierarchy or time. This is why leadership today is becoming less about accumulating knowledge and more about distributing it. In an age when information is abundant, but wisdom is scarce, leaders who generously share what they have learned will create disproportionate value.

The next move

The leaders who create the greatest significance are those who transform decades of experience into recognised authority, and then use that authority in service of others. The next move for accomplished leaders is not necessarily a bigger business, a more prestigious title or another successful exit. It is ensuring that everything they have learned continues creating value long after they have moved on.

The organisations we build may define our success. The ideas we leave behind define our significance. Experience becomes authority. Authority creates significance. And significance is the highest expression of leadership. **BM**



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China's negotiation code

For Indian executives, negotiating with Chinese counterparts often involves a familiar paradox. The two markets are neighbours and major commercial partners, even when the strategic backdrop is complex. Indian companies may source electronics, machinery, solar components, active pharmaceutical ingredients or auto parts from China, while also dealing with Chinese manufacturers, investors, distributors, technology partners or joint-venture candidates. The commercial logic can be compelling, but the communication can be demanding. Few words illustrate this better than “yes” and “no.”

In Chinese negotiations, these words do not always perform the function that Indian managers may expect in English-language boardrooms. A “yes” may not be a decision. A “no” may be expressed without the word ever being used. Silence may carry more meaning than a long explanation. The Chinese system of signalling agreement, hesitation, and refusal has its own rules. Misreading them can lead to premature assumptions, wasted time, or a loss of trust.

The first rule is that “yes” often means “I have understood,” not “I have agreed”

In many Indian corporate settings, particularly, when discussion takes place in English, “yes” is treated as acceptance. In Chinese communication, responses such as *shi* (“yes”), *dui* (“correct”) or *keyi* (“can”) may indicate attention, acknowledgement, or further exploration. They can mean, “I follow your point,” “that is reasonable,” or “this may be possible under certain conditions.” They do not necessarily mean, “we are ready to sign.”

This distinction matters because Chinese negotiation is often relational before it is transactional. An early meeting may be designed to assess seriousness, respect, credibility, and long-term compatibility, rather than to close. Indian executives are often skilled at building rapport, but the danger lies in translating a polite response into a firm conclusion too quickly.

The second rule is that “no” is often communicated indirectly.

In many Chinese business settings, a blunt refusal can be seen as damaging to the relationship. It may cause embarrassment or a loss of *mianzi*, usually translated as “face.”

Face is not merely ego. It is social standing, credibility, and dignity within a network. To reject a proposal too directly may make future cooperation harder.

For this reason, refusal may appear as softer language: “This will be difficult,” “We need to study this further,” “The timing may not be convenient,” “There are still some challenges,” or “We can discuss this later.” These phrases should not be dismissed as politeness. They may be the real answer.

Indian negotiators should be especially alert because Indian business language also uses indirect forms of disagreement. Familiar indirectness can create false comfort. In China, repeated postponement, circular discussion, or a lack of concrete next steps may indicate not simply caution but resistance. A skilled negotiator asks not only, “What did they say?” but also, “What are they avoiding?”

The third rule is that silence is part of the conversation

Many executives become uneasy when a proposal is met with a long pause. They interpret silence as disapproval or confusion and rush to fill it, often making concessions before they know whether a concession is required. In Chinese negotiations, silence may signal reflection, hierarchy, disagreement, internal caution, or the need to consult others. It can also allow both sides to preserve dignity while considering a difficult point.

For Indian leaders accustomed to energetic discussion and rapid problem-solving, this can feel slow. But speed is not always progress. A pause may be the moment when the other side is weighing the relationship, risks, and internal politics. Rather than interrupting silence with a discount, it is often better to ask: “What concerns would your team need to resolve for this to move forward?”



The fourth rule is that the person speaking may not be the person deciding

Chinese organisations can have more layered decision-making than the meeting room suggests. A counterpart may speak positively, discuss specifications, show interest in pricing or agree in principle while still needing approval from senior leaders, shareholders, headquarters, government-linked stakeholders or internal committees. A negotiating team may support the idea, but that support is not the same as final authority.

This matters for Indian companies because many India-China engagements involve complex supply chains, technical standards, regulation, payment structures, and risk allocation. A positive signal from the operating team may still have to pass through a decision system that is not visible to the visitor. Map that system early: Who influences the decision? Who must be consulted? Who has veto power? Who needs to be given face?

The fifth rule is that clarity must be firm, but not unnecessarily confrontational

Indian companies should not confuse cultural sensitivity with vagueness. Price, quality,



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delivery schedules, exclusivity, intellectual property, and dispute resolution all need precision. Difficult issues must be raised; the question is how.

A direct challenge such as “This clause is unacceptable” may be efficient in some contexts, but in a Chinese negotiation it can be read as combative if the relationship is not yet strong enough. A more effective formulation might be: “For our board and compliance teams to support this structure, we would need to manage this risk differently.” The message remains firm. The language leaves space for joint problem-solving.

The sixth rule is that a real “yes” becomes visible through action

Because verbal agreement may be layered, behaviour is often the more reliable indicator of commitment. Are senior people being introduced? Are technical teams being connected? Are revised drafts being exchanged? Are timelines becoming more specific? Are finance or legal teams being brought in? Are resources being assigned?

In Chinese negotiations, momentum is a form of communication. A warm “yes” followed by no movement should be treated cautiously. A cautious response followed by practical steps

may be far more valuable. Indian negotiators should therefore build milestones into the process. After each discussion, confirm what will happen next, by whom, and by when. This converts goodwill into evidence.

The final lesson is that Chinese negotiation rewards patient listening

For Indian companies, the stakes are practical. A misread “yes” can produce overconfidence in procurement planning, investment decisions, or market entry. A missed “no” can waste months of management time. A poorly handled disagreement can turn a negotiable issue into a relational problem. A leader who can read Chinese signals accurately gains an advantage: fewer surprises, stronger relationships and better contracts.

The unspoken rules of “yes” and “no” are not about deception. They are about communication in a setting where harmony, hierarchy, trust, reputation, and long-term reciprocity matter. Indian business culture also values relationships, respect and context, but the patterns are not identical. Assuming that ‘Asian culture’ is a single communication code is a common mistake.

The better approach is to slow down interpretation. Confirm understanding privately when necessary. Ask open questions. Watch patterns rather than isolated phrases. Do not force a counterpart into a public refusal. Build relationships before demanding finality. Map the decision chain. Treat action, not politeness, as the strongest evidence of commitment.

In China, the most important answer may not be the first one spoken. It may be found in the pause after a proposal, the person who does not speak, the meeting that is or is not scheduled, the document that moves, or the issue that keeps returning. To hear “yes” and “no” accurately is not simply a matter of language. It is a matter of business intelligence. **IM**



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The future of leadership lies not in choosing between generations, but in building bridges where experience and fresh perspectives come together to make institutions stronger.

LEADERSHIP

♦ RAJEEV KUMAR MEHAJAN, PHD, NOBLEGENICS TRUST

Bridging generations

“**R**ajeev Sir, this generation questions everything.” The remark came from a seasoned

senior executive immediately after one of my leadership interactions at Microsoft on 13 August 2024. There was no irritation in his voice, only genuine bewilderment.

Barely three weeks earlier, while participants (scientists, technocrats and administrators) were dispersing at NRSC, ISRO, Hyderabad on 24 July 2024, a young professional walked up with a smile. Referring to a point I had made about ownership among everyone, especially those joining ranks with seniors, he said almost apologetically,

“Sir, we are willing to work hard. We only wish our seniors trusted us a little more.” Standing between these two conversations, I realised that I was not listening to conflicting opinions. I was listening to two generations describing the workplace through entirely different lenses.

That moment stayed with me.

Over the last four decades, I have had the privilege of working in remarkably diverse institutional ecosystems—the armed forces, scientific organisations, government departments, research funding agencies, universities, international bodies and, more recently, through mentoring thousands of young professionals from equally diverse backgrounds.

The organisational structures differed. The missions differed. The cultures differed. Yet one leadership challenge surfaced with surprising consistency. How do institutions ensure that one generation does not merely replace another, but strengthens it?

Ironically, at a time when organisations are investing unprecedented attention in technology, artificial intelligence, digital transformation and future skills, a quieter question often remains unexplored. Are we investing equally in strengthening the relationship between generations that must work together to realise those ambitions?

It would be unfair to evaluate today's young professionals using benchmarks that shaped earlier generations. My generation entered workplaces where information was scarce, opportunities were limited, hierarchy was clearly defined and patience was considered an essential professional virtue

Looking beyond labels

Generation Z has perhaps been analysed more than any generation before it. Depending upon whom one listens to, they are either celebrated as technologically brilliant, adaptable and entrepreneurial, or criticised as impatient, demanding and unwilling to accept hierarchy.

Neither description, in my experience, captures the whole picture. One characteristic that has increasingly stood out during my interactions with young professionals and mentees is their strong preference for alignment between thought, expression and action.

While every generation has its strengths and limitations, young professionals are less inclined to maintain a distinction between 'what they believe', 'what they say' and 'what they do'.

Perhaps what impresses me even more is their instinctive preference for authenticity. They are usually less influenced by titles than by credibility. Less persuaded by authority than by competence. Less impressed by position than by purpose. Many leaders interpret this behaviour as a reluctance to respect hierarchy. I increasingly see it as a different way of defining respect.

Every generation is a product of its time

It would be unfair to evaluate today's young professionals using benchmarks that shaped earlier generations. My generation entered workplaces where information was scarce, opportunities were limited, hierarchy was clearly defined and patience was considered

an essential professional virtue. Today's professionals have grown up in a world of instant information, global exposure, rapid technological change and connectivity. The environments that shaped us are fundamentally different. Why then should we expect identical behaviours? If organisations genuinely seek to harness the strengths of emerging generation, the first requirement is not adaptation. It is understanding.

The other half of the conversation

Having said that, it is evident that the responsibility cannot rest exclusively with senior leaders. Younger professionals too must recognise that experience represents far more than the passage of time. It embodies judgement refined through uncertainty. Many lessons that appear obvious today were learnt over decades of experimentation, disappointment and perseverance. Technology accelerates learning. Experience deepens understanding. The two are not competing assets. They are complementary strengths.

Perhaps the real leadership challenge before organisations is not deciding which generation is right. The objective, after all, is not generational agreement. It is organisational effectiveness.

From managing generations to connecting them

The question, therefore, is no longer whether organisations should adapt to emerging generation. The more relevant question is whether organisations are prepared to become places where successive generations continuously learn from one another.

For decades, leadership development largely focused on preparing individuals for greater responsibility. Succession planning became an important management process. High-potential employees were identified, leadership designed and future organisational roles mapped with

Some of the world's most enduring organisations—whether in science, industry, defence or public service—have one characteristic in common. They consciously preserve institutional memory while creating space for young to question, innovate and lead

considerable care. Yet one critical dimension often remained outside formal planning.

Very little attention was paid to preparing generations to work effectively with one another. That omission may become expensive. Tomorrow's leaders will require two capabilities that business schools seldom teach—building bridges between generations and developing institutional literacy.

The 3A Leadership Bridge

Experience has led me to believe that organisations need what I call it 'The 3A Leadership Bridge' - a bridge that enables experience and emerging talent to move

towards one another rather than drift apart. In my view, this bridge rests on three powerful pillars:

- Acceptance:** Recognise that every generation is shaped by a different world. The goal is not to create replicas of ourselves but to understand and leverage the unique strengths each generation brings. Leadership begins where comparison ends.
- Appreciation:** Acceptance must lead to appreciation. Experience offers judgement and institutional memory; whereas youth brings speed, curiosity and fresh perspectives. Organisations flourish when these strengths complement rather than pull in different directions or compete with each other.
- Alignment:** The ultimate objective is not generational harmony but organisational

purpose. When people across generations align around a shared mission, differences in style become secondary and diversity becomes a strategic advantage.

Interestingly, the essence of this Bridge is reflected beautifully in the recent web series *Made in India – A Titan Story*. Through the portrayal of J.R.D. Tata by Naseeruddin Shah, one sees leadership that neither imposes authority nor abandons standards. The interactions between J.R.D., Xerxes Desai and subsequent generations offer a subtle but powerful illustration of acceptance, appreciation and alignment across generations.

Institutional literacy: An emerging leadership competency

We speak increasingly about digital literacy, financial literacy and AI literacy. Perhaps organisations now need another equally important capability: Institutional literacy. It is the ability to understand why different generations think, communicate and respond differently within the same organisation. It goes beyond recognising behavioural differences.

Institutional literacy replaces judgement with understanding and curiosity with trust. It encourages both generations to ask not merely how the other behaves, but why.

In my interactions with younger professionals, it is rare to encounter a generation unwilling to learn—more often, a generation unwilling to pretend. They rarely reject guidance. They reject being judged before being understood. Likewise, I seldom find senior leaders resisting change.

Some of the world's most enduring organisations—whether in science, industry, defence or public service—have one characteristic in common. They consciously preserve institutional memory while creating space for young to question, innovate and lead.

One nation, many institutional cultures

One observation has consistently emerged from my interactions: intergenerational transitions play out differently in different institutional cultures. In fact, cultures may differ, but the need for mutual respect between generations remains universal.

Many private sector organisations have adopted flatter hierarchies, collaborative workplaces and informal communication, where respect is earned more through professional credibility than protocol. In contrast, government organisations, public sector enterprises, universities, research institutions and sections of the armed forces continue to draw strength from traditions where hierarchy reinforces accountability, continuity and institutional discipline.

Neither model is inherently superior. Each has evolved in response to its unique purpose. The challenge arises when one generation interprets the other's behaviour without understanding the culture that shaped it - mistaking protocol for rigidity or informality for indiscipline.

Leadership, therefore, demands contextual intelligence: the ability to appreciate diverse institutional cultures and help them evolve without losing their essential character.

The responsibility of leadership

The leaders who leave the deepest institutional legacy may not necessarily be those who introduce the most disruptive technologies or deliver the highest quarterly results. They are more likely to be those who build cultures where young professionals feel confident to question respectfully, and experienced colleagues feel valued to share their wisdom generously.

Such organisations do not depend on charismatic individuals. They nurture leadership as a culture rather than an individual capability. Perhaps that is the true measure of institutional

maturity - when people feel safer to question convention without undermining the institution.

In the Indian Air Force, where I received my early professional grooming, rank ensured clarity of command; it never prevented a young officer from contributing an idea. Contrary to the popular perception, respect for hierarchy and openness to ideas in services coexisted naturally.

From succession planning to succession preparation

Succession planning has long been recognised as a leadership priority. Yet today's demographic realities call for something more—succession preparation. Preparing senior leaders to mentor yet unlearn and relearn. Preparing younger professionals to learn. Preparing organisations to value innovation and institutional memory in equal measure.

A final reflection

Every generation believes it is shaping the future. The more important question is whether it is preparing the next generation to shape the one beyond.

I remain deeply optimistic, not because one generation is better than another, but because each brings something indispensable. Youth contributes possibilities; experience offers perspective.

Institutions flourish when both recognise their interdependence. Neither can realise its full potential without the other.

Leadership question of our time is no longer, "How do I manage the next generation?" It is, "How do I create an environment where generations make one another better?"

Every generation inherits an institution. Its greatest responsibility is not merely to improve it, but to make it stronger, wiser and more welcoming for the generation that follows. **IM**



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