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CUSTOMER-FIRST, EMPLOYEE-DRIVEN APPROACH



A WIN-WIN SITUATION

Greg Kihlström

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Happy employees means happy customers

Shrinivas Dempo is President, AIMA & Chairman, Dempo Group of Companies.

Customer first' is the fundamental condition of being in business. There is no business without what the customers need, want, or prefer. Many Indian businesses inscribe 'Customer is God' in their establishments.

However, what the customer gets depends on the competence and incentive of the employees. There would be no customers and no business unless there were employees who were willing and able to provide an acceptable buying and service experience to the customer.

Therefore, while positioning the customer as God, it is necessary for businesses to see employees as angels. To have a 'customer first' approach, the management must also be 'employee centric'.

Business leaders must reconcile the competing immediate interests of the company, the customers, and the employees so that their long-term interests converge. The pressures of generating more revenues in the shortest time and at the lowest costs forces business leaders to design

employee incentives in ways that end up short-changing the customer and hurting the business if the market has competition.

Being 'customer first' must start with 'employee-centricity'. Employees will try to deliver a good buying and service experience to customers only when they are assured of a good working experience. Happy employees

are loyal employees, and they make customers happy and loyal, too.

The best way to ensure that customers buy more and more often from the business, and recommend it to others, is by ensuring that the employees make a special effort to help the customers obtain the appropriate solutions they are looking for, both at the time of purchase and later, when they need service support. If and when the employees feel pressurised to complete sales quickly, they can be expected to embellish the product promise, which would inevitably lead to customer disappointment. They would also try to achieve sale primarily through discounting and freebies, which would diminish the brand proposition and perception.

Business leaders with a longer vision must prioritise building relationships with the customers and the employees, and not just the immediate deal. The syndrome of 'a bird in hand is better than two in the bush' tends to drive extractive business practices and undermines business enhancement.

It is not very smart to prioritise savings in employee training and retention costs when there are greater gains to be made by spending on improving customer experience and loyalty. Spending enough on the employee's training and paying them well enough are the most direct means of aligning the employee's interests with those of the company and the customer. There are also non-financial measures that can get the employees to do more than what they are contractually obliged to. Allowing

Being 'customer first' must start with 'employee-centricity'. Employees will try to deliver a good buying and service experience to customers only when they are assured of a good working experience.

To please customers in every interaction and transaction, it is critical to fill the organisation with happy employees. More than branding and marketing, customers make up their minds based on the employees they interact with.

employees reasonable autonomy in addressing customers' issues and customization of product, price, delivery, maintenance, inter-departmental coordination, etc, can make employees feel more trusted. Without trusting the employees' intelligence and judgement, their targets and training would restrict them to fixed responses to fixed situations and frustrate the customers.

Appreciating and rewarding employee initiative does more to get their skin in the game than the threat of punishment

or sacking. Business leaders could link employee recognition and rewards to the rate of enhanced and repeat purchases by the high value customers. Incentives can be created for employees who engage customers in improving the products and business processes.

It is also vital to ensure that driving a 'customer first' approach does not become a relentlessly stressful routine for the employees. A high frequency of high-pressure tasks and goals can lead to employee burnout. It is quite common that those who do more are expected to do even more, which results in employees deliberately lowering the output and the standards. When employees are kept under permanent stress, they lose their motivation and confidence and even become hostile towards customers. Therefore, combining a customer-first approach with employee-centricity requires a sensitive calibration of the

company's promise to the customers and its demands on the employees.

To please customers in every interaction and transaction, it is critical to fill the organisation with happy employees. More than branding and marketing, customers make up their minds based on the employees they interact with. The excitement and confidence of the employees rubs off on the customers and in the end the business generates larger and sustained sales. A happy organisation attracts customers, an unhappy one drives them away. 

The opinion expressed is personal.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

It is generally accepted that a 'customer-first' approach is a winning strategy. In it, customer needs and customer experience are given priority over the product-/service-provider's own presumptions, no matter how calculated and thought-through the latter are.

A customer-first approach helps generate brand loyalty, since customers tend to lean towards brands that focus and cater to their requirements. Further, since the brand has now understood the customers' requirements with one product/service, it will most likely get diversification of products/services right, as well.

But, while we agree that 'customer comes first', what about employees? Many organisations have started realising the benefits of having an employee-driven culture—it helps nurture talent, ideas, and innovation, fosters collaboration, and encourages constructive feedback. These are requisites of a 'great working team'.

By putting the employee in the 'driver's seat', an employee-driven culture also helps ease one of the biggest challenges of human resources, ie, attrition, since, talent that is respected in an organisation is likely to stay with the organisation.

Clubbing these two together to create a 'customer-first, employee-driven' strategy can ensure long-term business success for an organisation. After all, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that happy employees will make your customers happy, and vice-versa.

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

Maneck Davar
Maneck Davar

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WINNING STRATEGY



A win-win situation

Businesses stand to gain a lot by implementing a 'customer-first, employee-driven' approach.

♦ GREG KIHLSSTRÖM, AUTHOR, *HOUSE OF THE CUSTOMER*



Dinesh Bhogale

Today's business leaders have to take into account many different, yet, equally important priorities, making for a complex professional landscape characterised by competing demands on their time. Business leaders engaged in sales, and at the same time, keeping employees engaged and happy, face challenges on a daily basis. But there is an opportunity to create a win-win situation for both customers and employees. By taking a 'customer-

first' approach and building an employee-driven organisation, companies can create lasting success. Let us take a look at how this strategy works.

Creating a 'customer-first' approach

A 'customer-first' approach is essential for businesses to stay competitive in today's market. This means emphasising customer needs in all decisions, implementing feedback loops, prioritising customer satisfaction over profits, utilising data to better meet customer needs, and developing a culture that values customers as partners in success.

Implementing feedback loops allows companies to identify areas of improvement and gain insights about their customers' wants and needs. Utilising data helps businesses make decisions more quickly and accurately. Investing in customer relationships will ensure that customers keep coming back for more. Finally, creating a culture that puts customers first will make them feel valued and appreciated by the company.

A 'customer-first' approach is a smart business strategy that recognises that the customer should be at the heart of any organisation. This thorough understanding places the needs, desires, and expectations of customers at the core of any service or product being offered. It encourages the company to maintain transparency and build trust, thereby earning customer loyalty. Furthermore, by actively attending to customer complaints and grievances, companies can stay agile and nimble relative to their competitors. In short, putting customers first is not only a measure of customer service excellence but also a sound commercial strategy for remaining competitive over time.

Building an employee-driven organisation

A successful business requires more than just happy customers—it requires motivated employees too! To achieve this, business leaders must establish goals and objectives for employees, provide transparency into company operations and decision-making processes, encourage autonomy, trust, and freedom when solving challenges at work, invest in employee development programs to motivate their work and

Business leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of meeting the needs of both customers and employees. By tying customers and employees together, we can foster a win-win situation that benefits everyone involved.

innovation, and reward successes with competitive salaries and benefits packages or recognition programs. Implementing these practices will show employees that they are valued by the company,

which, in turn, will lead to greater productivity and creativity from within the organisation.

Organisations that put their employees at the forefront and establish an environment of transparency, collaboration, and trust are prized for their successful outcomes. Research shows that when employees feel highly involved in a company's goals and objectives, they become more committed to the organisation's success. Giving employees the autonomy to tackle challenging tasks, while having access to resources, information, and support, motivates them to bring new perspectives and approaches

that are necessary for growth. Therefore, it is clear why an employee-driven organisation is essential for any business striving to achieve success.

Tying the two together

Business leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of meeting the needs of both customers and employees. By tying customers and employees together, we can foster a win-win situation that benefits everyone involved.

With customers requiring more personalised experiences, initiatives such as offering added value to consumers or special discounts can help businesses improve their profitability. Equally, offering improved work conditions, better training, and modern office spaces can ensure employees remain engaged with the company culture and motivated to perform at a high level.

Moreover, investment in employee satisfaction results in increased loyalty from customers and improved overall performance of the business. For example, more satisfied employees will provide



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Greg Kihlström is Principal and Chief Strategist, GK5A. Greg is the host of the podcast *The Agile Brand with Greg Kihlström*. He is also author, *House of the Customer: A blueprint for one-to-one, customer-first, employee-driven business transformation*.

FOREWORD BY **BARRY PADGETT**
CEO, Amperity

house OF THE **customer**



A blueprint for 1:1, customer-first,
employee-driven business transformation

GREG KIHLSSTRÖM

*Best Selling Author of Measuring the Success of the
Customer Experience and The Agile Brand*

better customer service, as they can relate to the needs of the customer better than those who do not feel a sense of job satisfaction.

Where everyone wins

It is clear that combining a 'customer-first' approach with an employee-driven organisation is essential for creating lasting success within any business setting. Corporate leaders should view this as an investment in their company, because when employees are engaged and customers are happy, it creates an environment that promotes higher profits and enhanced productivity within the organisation.

By focusing on both the needs of your customers, as well as those of your employees, you can ensure that everyone's best interests are taken into consideration when making decisions or driving forward key initiatives within your organization. Doing so will help you build strong customer relationships while ensuring your team feels empowered to drive positive change throughout the company. **IM**



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The decision dividend

How do you solve a ₹100 billion-problem with a whistle? By using the best framework. Managers, leaders—even ancient kings—can solve almost any problem effectively, provided they know how. More on that whistle later.

When my IMD colleague Professor Albrecht Enders and I were researching our book *Solvable: A simple solution to complex problems*, we discovered an inconvenient truth: the trait most valued in executives is among the rarest.

World Economic Forum and McKinsey report that decisiveness often trumps other skills—even those deemed critical to business success, such as communication expertise or the ability to collaborate effectively.

What is rare is often precious. And so is the case with problem-solving. During our research, Professor Enders and I found that effective problem-solvers are uncommon in business and public service, right from senior management level to the very top.

Our instinctive responses—known by psychologists as System 1 thinking—might

enable us to make snap decisions on everyday choices such as opting which sari, dress or suit to wear in the morning. Yet System 1 is inadequate for the sorts of problems the typical Indian business faces daily. We classify such conundrums as CIDNI (complex, ill-defined, and non-immediate but important).

Complex, because the obstacles that prevent us from achieving our goal are diverse, unclear, or variable; ill-defined, because the goal itself might be unclear—and often different depending on whom you ask; non-immediate but important, because—unlike our daily wardrobe choice—the quality of the decision-making process is more crucial than its rapidity.

These are the challenges that, if not addressed effectively, cause executive stress, cripple efficiency, and in extreme cases, topple companies altogether.

Framing failure

Yet, if effective problem-solving is so highly valued and so critical to success, why do not many more senior managers and executives develop such expertise? The answer is that problem-solving does not come easy.

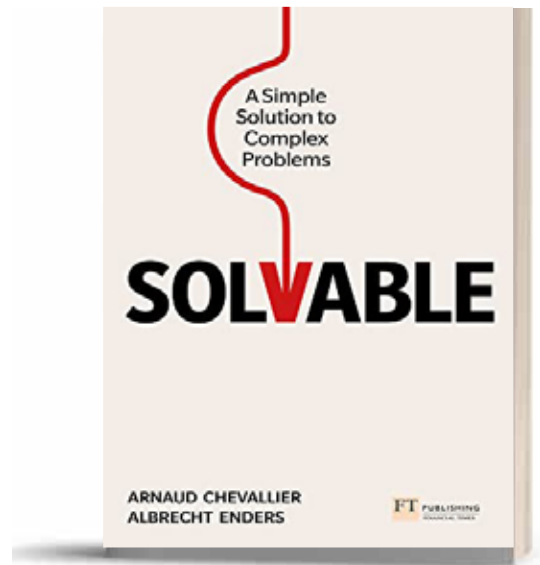
Professor Enders and I found several factors that militated against problem-solving success,

yet one overarching issue stood out: executives often struggle to define their problem properly at the outset. This framing failure often predicts poorer outcomes: if you are unclear whether gaining market share, improving profitability, or increasing revenues is your goal, it is less likely that you will be able to deploy your usually very limited resources to create the most impact for your organisation.

During a multi-year study at IMD, we asked more than 950 senior managers and professionals to share the key issues they observe in their organisations during problem-solving: about 55 per cent of them reported framing issues. The survey revealed that framing failures was consistent across all geographies, industries, and seniority levels. Nor is an inability to frame decisions novel. History is littered with examples of even the most decorated leaders toiling with such complex decisions. This is where the whistle comes in!

French lesson

In 1661, Louis XIV ruled France. The self-proclaimed Sun King set about celebrating the opulence and grandeur of the French royal family by commissioning Versailles, the lavish



palace near Paris that remains one of Old Europe's finest châteaux.

At the height of Louis' power, Versailles was home to a scarcely imaginable 2,400 fountains. The fountains were deliberately ostentatious—designed to showcase to foreign dignitaries the glamour and allure of 17th century France. Yet, for all his grand plans, the bombastic Louis had counted against something significant: the laws of physics.



Effective hydraulics were a distant dream in the 1660s. This was a problem, because Versailles, like many royal palaces, was sited atop a hill: all the potential sources of water were below it. Its topography was particularly taxing given that its 2,400 fountains consumed the equivalent of two Olympic swimming pools of water every hour.

For Louis' engineers, one problem was particularly important: how can we deliver sufficient water to Versailles? With the problem so framed, they embarked on a multi-year journey that saw the ushering in of marvels of inventions and engineering, from the implementation of horse-activated pumps to the erection of windmills, and the digging of large reservoirs and irrigation canals. Yet, none of the measures ever brought enough water to satiate the king, who constantly asked for more.

To placate him, his exasperated engineers sought ever grander cures. Rerouting the river Bièvre and building a 1,500m long aqueduct enabled the fountains to operate for a few hours a day—albeit by consuming more water than the entire city of Paris.

Eventually, the French court devised the Machine de Marly, an elephantine contraption that siphoned water from the River Seine. It required damming the river at two points, demanded 1,800 men to build, and cost the equivalent of 64 bn in today's prices. A marvel of engineering, it was able to bring water 160 m up! Yet, it served the fountains with only half the water that they needed.

Finally, new lakes were dug and plans launched for an 80-km canal—a project that required the employment of 30,000 men. Louis' vanity project left France near bankrupt. When war broke out with the League of Augsburg in 1689, a diminished France found itself struggling for resources, and the canal project was shelved.

Yet the suspension of construction proved a blessing—because it gave Louis' demoralised engineers pause for thought.

Recall how the engineers had, all those



years, costs, and labour ago, framed their problem: “How can we deliver sufficient water to Versailles?” By framing the problem that way, they prompted almost three decades of toil, misery, and destitution. Nobody stopped to consider a different frame: How can we deliver enough water to Versailles to keep the king happy?

The reframe helped them, as mentioned earlier, solve the problem by a whistle.

Working to a different frame, “How can we deliver enough water to Versailles to keep the king happy?” the fountaineers landed on a solution that was as ingenious as it was simple. Instead of running all the fountains continuously, the fountaineers simply whistled whenever the king and his distinguished guests approached a fountain. Upon hearing the signal, the water operator turned on the fountain within the royal party's sightline. Once the dignitaries were out of sight, he would whistle for the next fountaineer to open his water supply while turning off the fountain just visited.

Meet FrED

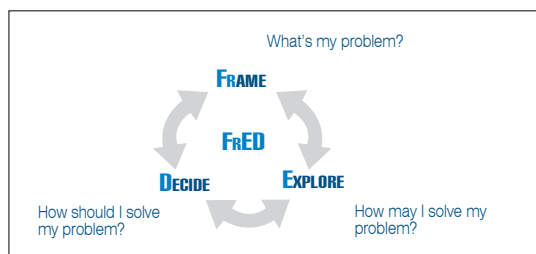
Although poor framing can be disastrous for organisations like the French royal court, the opposite is also true. By learning to frame problems effectively, managers can be like the whistling fountaineer: bringing success, efficiency, and satisfaction to their organisations.

Although poor framing can be disastrous for organisations, the opposite is also true. By learning to frame problems effectively, managers can bring success, efficiency, and satisfaction to their organisations.

Fr signifies 'Frame', one element of our FrED model (see graphic) – an invaluable tool for senior managers who want to learn the science of solving problems.

E stands for 'Explore'. In Solvable we outline the techniques for exploring innovative alternatives—the viaduct, the canal...or the whistle—as well as clarifying what is of value to the decision makers and the key stakeholders.

D represents 'Decide'. If the framing is inadequate and the exploration insufficient, a decision might not be forthcoming. Our framework reveals how a poor decision making process can compromise executives' confidence in their choice—leading some decisions never to be executed. And so we provide concrete ideas to sidestep this trap as well as suboptimal framing and deciding.



FrED can be applied to any CIDNI problem. In fact, over the past twenty years, it has helped us coach hundreds of people to solve problems in disciplines as wide-ranging as management, engineering, design, architecture, and even philosophy.

Consider this scenario from Indian Railways, one of the world's largest employers. Imagine that the railway's managers are receiving regular complaints from passengers that the Vande Bharat Express between New Delhi and Varanasi is too slow. The obvious Frame for the problem is, 'How can we speed up the Vande Bharat Express?'

One alternative frame is 'How can we make customers happy with the Vande Bharat Express?'

The first question, 'How can we speed up the Vande Bharat Express?' provokes us to Explore solutions such as upgrading the track, making fewer stops en route, or reducing safety standards so the locomotive can be driven at higher speeds. Yet, all these proposals have significant downsides: upgrading the track is disruptive and expensive; making fewer stops will be unpopular with customers who live near those stations; and reducing safety standards increases the likelihood of accidents.

Yet the second frame, 'How can we make customers happy with the Vande Bharat Express?' frees us up to Explore a more innovative mix of solutions. A luxury restaurant car might be added to every service, so passengers enjoy the journey more and can use the time to eat well and socialise with their fellow travellers. The onboard wifi could be improved, making working online, and watching high-quality movies, easier. A sports carriage, on which passengers could watch live cricket while relaxing with a cold drink, could be installed.

If passengers could make better use of their time on board, perhaps their demands for expensive and disruptive mechanical upgrades might subside.

Iterative process

The reality of good problem-solving is that our findings prompt us to review our earlier conclusions. As the diagram shows, problem-solving need not begin with a frame. It can just as easily start as we explore potential solutions in our head to a challenge we face in our managerial work.

In *Solvable*, we demonstrate how managers can start anywhere on the FrED circle and move around the model in either direction.

All routes lead to greater business success. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arnaud Chevallier is Professor of Strategy, The International Institute for Management Development (IMD). He is co-author, *Solvable: A simple solution to complex problems*.

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How we use words and numbers to persuade and negotiate every day, explains Gary Peacock, an adjunct lecturer, Australian Graduate School of Management. Gary is also co-author, *Persuading For Results and Managing B2B Customers You Can't Afford to Lose*.

**MYTH
BUSTER**

Make them believe

"I believe in everything until it's disproved."

- John Lennon

MYTH 1: ONLY LOGIC MATTERS.

In December, a client named Mike called me, and said, "I just don't get it."

I have told Stephen he needs to change the method he introduced ten years ago. It is out of date; I and everyone else in the industry are doing things differently—except him. So logically he should change. But he will not listen and he is getting angry.

Many managers believe that if they explained the logic of why someone needs to change, then the person should change. However, frequently what stops change is emotion. So why not ask yourself two questions:

What emotions might hinder this change?

What emotions might help this change?

For Stephen, since he introduced the system 10 years ago, he may feel a loss of face which can create sadness or anger. Also, being told that everybody else is right and you are wrong will typically generate anger. In contrast, Stephen had the foresight

to introduce a new method 10 years ago and may, well, feel proud of his previous achievement in challenging the old way of doing things.

An effective way to manage emotions to encourage change is to tell Stephen a story in three parts. Part one is to talk about what the situation was 10 years ago and what reasons convinced Stephen the company needed a new system. Part two is to discuss, what has changed in the environment (customers, competitors, and regulators)—all outside his control, so he has done nothing wrong—that means the existing system now needs to change. Part three is to link the future change to his knowledge and success with introducing the previous system. This would reduce any negative emotions and increase positive ones.

It is a myth that only logic matters; a professional way to influence emotions is to tell business stories. For more examples of how business stories can influence emotions and change, have a look at this blog: <https://www.anecdote.com/blog>.

MYTH 2: JUST PRESENT THE ONE RIGHT WAY.

Some managers believe they should present the one right way that solves the problem. In meetings, listen for language like “we must,” “we should,” and “we have to.” The reasons are that early in their career many simple problems have one best way. So, why not get straight to the point?

What managers eventually learn is that other people want to be involved in the thinking that created this one best way. If you do not present the information in a way that allows them to be involved in the thinking, they will find a way to get involved in the thinking. They need to convince themselves you have done a good job. What this looks like is questions about: your assumptions, your methods, and how you have considered alternatives. Junior managers often get frustrated with other people’s desire to be involved.

However, changing from presenting one solution to presenting three options will make it easier for the audience. Walk through the process:

Here is the problem we are trying to solve; you need to remind the audience because, often, audience members have been in back-

to-back meetings and may have forgotten what problem you are trying to solve. You will know this because they will criticise you for not solving a different problem. At the end of this section, a simple method is to ask the audience if everyone agrees with the problem. Do not proceed until everyone agrees.

Explain the criteria for choosing the recommended option.

Provide three options, this is enough to prove you have considered a range. But do not give too many options lest it makes the decision too complicated.

State the recommended solution.

This myth comes from a manager’s desire to save time by only presenting the one right way. Trying to prevent the audience being involved in your thinking will often take more time and be more stressful than simply walking them your thinking.

MYTH 3: WHEN PERSUADING WITH NUMBERS, MORE COLOURS GIVES MORE CREDIBILITY.

Every week, managers present numbers because every manager has a budget and needs to explain the positive gap when ahead



of budget or the negative gap when behind. Once there is a gap, then managers need to persuade other managers to agree with the action they recommend.

To persuade, managers can reach for many kinds of software: Excel, Numbers, Power Pivot, Power BI, Tableau, PowerPoint, and Keynote. For these ways of analysing and presenting data, the default seems to be: use as many colours as possible, use a new colour for every series of data, in tables highlight one kind of data in yellow and another in green and the next in blue.

However, when someone looks at your ‘rainbow of colours’, every time they see a different colour, they check to see what the difference is to other colours. If you have five colours, then we overload their brain trying to compare 10 combinations of two colours; if you have seven colours, we overload their brain with 21 combinations. While your audience is searching to understand what is different, they are not listening to your message: they keep asking themselves, ‘what is your message’? More colours equal more confusion, which means less credibility.

So, what should managers do to persuade with numbers? Learn from the best: The Economist creates some of the clearest charts.

Watch this 7-minute video explaining what makes their charts so good: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGGkAGBre3A>

Or browse hundreds of these charts and see what persuasive charts look like: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail>

Perhaps you think creating charts like this would take too long? See how to use

Excel to create an Economist chart in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5168AW7rLM>

To persuade better with numbers, use fewer colours. Instead, use three shades of one colour (for eg, three shades of blue) with three shades of another colour (for eg, black).

MYTH 4: YOU DON'T WANT THE OTHER PERSON TO SAY “NO”.

As an experienced negotiator, I know that many managers are worried about the other party saying “no”. They believe that once the other party says “no”, then it is harder to change their mind and get a “yes”. On hearing the other negotiator say “no”, this fear of “no” could encourage the manager to immediately offer concessions to try to change the “no” to a “yes”. However, if an experienced negotiator gets concessions from saying “no”, then what do you think they will do next? They will say “no” again and wait for more concessions.

Instead, FBI hostage negotiator Chris Voss (co-author) in his book, *Never Split the Difference* (2016) offers a different perspective. When someone says “no”, they feel like they have protected themselves. So, they relax and are willing to explain their reasons. Especially when you ask one of two questions:

“What about this doesn’t work for you?”

“What would you need to make it work?”

Or you might try a gentler approach, Voss suggests use labelling and say, “It seems like there’s something here that bothers you.” Then bite your tongue and wait for at least six seconds for the other party to answer.

In my experience, once the other side says “no”, then they are willing to explain and give you the clues that can help you create a package both parties can agree too. So, instead of being afraid of “no”, ask questions to encourage a “no” and then watch the information flow. 

In my experience, once the other side says “no”, then they are willing to explain and give you the clues that can help you create a package both parties can agree too. So, instead of being afraid of “no”, ask questions to encourage a “no” and then watch the information flow.



Act today

I am tempted to start with a quote by Voltaire – “Three things exercise a constant influence over the minds of men – climate, government, and religion.” Whereas, we are all familiar with the latter two, climate, on the other hand, might seem a curious addition to Voltaire’s list, especially because we tend to think of climate change as a modern preoccupation. While the unprecedented speed of change in the contemporary world is remarkable, so, too, is the fact that the acceleration primarily due to human behaviour and consumption patterns.

Without quick, further action to reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs), there will soon be more carbon in the atmosphere than there has been for millions of years. Indeed 80 to 90 per cent of the burning of fossil fuels has happened since the end of WW II. Galloping energy demands have led to vast quantities of GHGs but other sources like pollution from particulate matter, waste generated by humanity, plastic debris landing up in the oceans etc. have also added to the problem. Sadly, we may be heading for a mass extinction event!

Can we respond to this huge challenge of sustainability? It seems, yes, we can certainly slow down the devastating march of climate

change by adopting more responsible ways of living. It must, of course, be an all-pervasive effort as it touches all facets of our lives.

Sustainability has now become a buzzword and, happily, a lot of people—individuals, organisations, and governments—are making efforts to mitigate the damage done by climate change. Only time will show how serious, honest, and effective the steps being taken are. However, one thing is clear: everyone must be onboard and communities must get involved in coordinating individual efforts.

Also, everything must be tackled—water, food, energy conservation, agriculture, organic farming, personal attire, waste management, check on use of plastics and movement of plastic waste into the oceans, switch over to renewable energy, use of electric vehicles, slowing down on binge shopping just to possess ‘more of everything’, resource friendly and least polluting manufacture, reduced transportation of our food, companies to give preference to green vendors, and so on! There are perhaps a thousand ways we can move to more responsible living.

Let me start with our personal attire. I seriously doubt if many of you discerning readers can make an honest confession that there is nothing in their wardrobes that has not been used for one year! Reality is that we have

become hoarders...compulsive buyers who do not spare a minute to think whether the item we are buying is needed. We see a friend wearing a nice, new shirt and rush to the mall to pick up something similar. Once there, couple of other items catch my eye and I put those also in the basket. Then, another store is displaying great suits, yet another beautiful kurta-pajamas, a third specialises in casual jackets or track suits or pullovers. There are always sales going on.

Fully aware that these are mere gimmicks, we throw caution to the winds and pick up stuff at every store. The new acquisitions are lovingly worn once or twice and then they land at the back of the cupboard. We are maniacs with an insatiable appetite for more; “it’s my money and I will splurge; who is to question” — okay, it is your money. But do spare a thought for Mother Earth that suffers for every one’s folly! We seem to forget that making of each garment—even a handkerchief—leaves carbon footprint that hurts the environment. Retail therapy is a harsh truth.

We have to learn to live with less

There is a deep, age-old connection between the planet and the people. Agriculture

developed perhaps ten to twelve thousand years ago when people began to domesticate plants and animals, and communities were built that led to the transition from a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle. This relationship was always based on mutual respect—people tended the land with compassion and the land rewarded them with nutrient-rich produce like cereals, vegetables, and fruits. That is when the global population started ballooning—from about 5 million at the time to the present over 8 billion! Unfortunately, the beautiful relationship began to sour about seven decades ago when industrialisation picked up speed, less and less land was available for farming, and people started using chemical fertilisers to increase productivity. In the process, they forgot to nurture the land and let it degrade.

Realisation of our folly came quite late—just about the onset of 21st century—when scientists and later environmentalists like the former US vice president Al Gore and Sir David Attenborough shook the world with their findings about the devastating march of climate change. That is when we noticed that productivity and nutrient content of our crops was going southward. This led to even greater use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides,



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insecticides as well as emergence of genetically modified (GM) crops; we are all aware of the conflicts that followed.

Anyway, the whole world is now aware of the enormous damage and sustainability is on top of everybody's mind. Publications like the FAO's (Food & Agriculture Organization of the UN) 'Sustainable Development Goals – working for Zero Hunger' has brought out guidelines primarily directed at decision makers responsible for integrating the goals & targets of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development into National Policies & Programs with focus on Food & Agriculture as also Rural Development. It spells out efforts to increase productivity—to feed the 8.6 billion projected population in 2030 and 9.8 billion in 2050—and addresses social and environmental costs involved, water scarcity, soil degradation, biodiversity loss, etc.

Our own ministry of food and agriculture has also dwelt at length on crucial issues like (i) facilitation of universal access to productive resources, finance, and services; (ii) connecting small land holders to markets; (iii) encouraging diversification of produce and income; (iv) managing water scarcity; (v) enhancing soil health; (vi) reducing wastage of food—worldwide 33 per cent food is lost, figure for India could be even higher; (vii) social protection; (viii) augmenting nutrient content and others. Many policy initiatives are already in place—touching virtually all areas of economy and social development; rightly so because the two aspects are interdependent and connected irrevocably. After all a healthy and educated child also means greater development of the parents and the society.

These are all good but, as in case of any legislation, the key lies in regular monitoring and leak-proof implementation. Climate change and inclusivity are by far the two biggest problems before the world, and national programs and policy interventions

must address both these assiduously. Equally important are the efforts of business and industry – the corporate world. Happily, we are seeing ever increasing public-private partnerships in various verticals of national growth. Admittedly the \$5 trillion GDP by 2024-25 goal has got derailed primarily due to the COVID pandemic, but I have every hope that the IMF forecast (World Economic Outlook – 2017) of India becoming the second largest economy in the world by 2030, on PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) basis will come true.

To be more specific about policy interventions for sustainable development in agriculture, I would like to see tax breaks and more supportive policies for companies manufacturing organic fertilisers, and herbal insecticides and pesticides. We also need certification and inspection arms of the government and third-party assignees to be strengthened for developing consumer confidence in organic products.

Just to add some more sectors of economic growth and decarbonisation potential, there is great need to bring down the cost of electric vehicles (EVs) and creation of a dependable, countrywide charging eco system. GST on EVs and batteries has been reduced to 5 per cent, which is a good start. We now need production-linked incentives (PLI) and attractive policies for investments in R&D in this sector.

The government should also think about extending the Green Building Codes to clean energy, energy-efficiency, waste disposal, and very strict conservation measures for water for all construction activity including residential buildings above a certain size. Currently there is a policy for energy conservation for large companies manufacturing cement and steel—referred to as perform, achieve and trade (PAT); this should be extended to several other industries.



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Construction industry is a big culprit

Recent tragic happenings in Joshimath have brought into sharp focus the follies of this crucial sector of economic growth and how their mistakes—wilful or otherwise—are causing widespread harm to ecology and why is it necessary to check their ways for the sake of sustainability. Unfortunately, Uttarakhand is not the only state where such disastrous ‘sinking of earth’ has happened. Latest reports bring out horror stories from across the country. Shimla, McLeod Ganj & Darjeeling also have serious issues. These are all hilly areas with fragile ecology and what is happening there has similarities by way of ignoring early warning signs. However, the curse of illegal and irresponsible construction is spread almost all over the country and, in fact, more blatant and damaging in big cities.

One factor is common—rapid increase in population leading to huge pressure on land prices and emergence of an unholy nexus between builders and civic administrators. Let me first look at a tier one town.

Gurgaon—south of Delhi, a sleepy little town till the 1980s—has seen explosive

growth in the last 20 years. Current estimates put the population figure at 12.5 million. It was given the sobriquet of ‘Millennium City’ mostly by the builders. Despite warnings of a looming water shortage, they kept on building furiously and the land prices kept zooming up. Commercial property in the city was lapped up by large corporates from all over the world including perhaps 400 on the ‘Fortune 500’ list. Even though the original master plan had no provision for high rise residential buildings—only plotted colonies with houses not more than 2 1/2 stories were planned—the city has probably the largest number of skyscrapers in the country after Mumbai. Last few years, whenever there are heavy rains, Gurugram (as the city is known now) gets the infamous tag ‘Gurujam’ because the whole city gets waterlogged and everything comes to a standstill, at times, for 36 hours! Why does that happen? Simple answer—every topography has natural drainage channels where no construction is supposed to come up. However, the criminal nexus ignores that with impunity and plans are sanctioned at every place. To add insult to injury, all 13 beautiful

To be more specific about policy interventions for sustainable development in agriculture, I would like to see tax breaks and more supportive policies for companies manufacturing organic fertilisers, and herbal insecticides and pesticides.

large water bodies in the city have been filled up and construction stands over these. Add

to it, informal urbanisation of rural areas, wholesale conversion of land use, encroachments on the forest zone, and something called '*gair mumkin pahar*' and we have a medley of new complexes mushrooming all over. Lot of money changes hands under the table and everyone is happy. It is unlikely that this is without the blessings of powerful politicians. Net result: traffic jams, water logging, regular power and water shortages, noisy diesel generators, perennial air pollution, continuous road repairs, stalled smoke spewing vehicles on every road, sharply reduced green cover...and just

too many people in a city meant for perhaps 20% of the present numbers. The situation would be pretty much similar in Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Mumbai was doomed a long time ago but the municipal authorities keep it going somehow.

Back to Joshimath—currently in the limelight for all the wrong reasons. It appears that one of the biggest culprits here is National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC). It is

unthinkable that this much-admired behemoth, with highly-trained technical manpower, did not do a proper job of geological investigation. Also, everyone ignored early warning signs of cracks in the walls, bending trees, fissures in the ground and life went on as usual. And now, reports mention that at many places in Joshimath, the ground has sunk by as much as 70 cm putting the poor residents at great risk of life and property. Like many other Himalayan towns, Joshimath has also seen a huge construction boom with multi storied buildings on fragile slopes built with total disregard to rules and regulations and without reference to seismic surveys. Even Army and ITBP establishments came up there.

All this in a town which had hardly any concrete structures in the 1960s—even government departments functioned out of corrugated roof light buildings and their people lived in similar accommodation. There are almost identical stories from Darjeeling—a landslide prone terrain—where heavy road and railway projects are coming up or Shimla—a town planned for 25,000 has a present population of 2.3 lakh and the ridge 'pride of the town' sits on top of a 1-million-gallon water reservoir.

All these places are waiting for disasters to happen. All our major hill stations like Shimla, Mussoorie, Nainital, Manali, and Ooty were



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designed by the British for a small fraction of their present population. Unchecked influx of tourists and establishments to cater to their stay and food add to the woes. We should have learnt lessons from our friendly neighbour Bhutan that has assiduously ensured controlled inflow of visitors. They have deliberately refused permission to a larger number, not fallen for greater earnings and maintained the pristine beauty of their country.

Our tourism must be 'ecologically sustainable'. The need is to make new hill stations and not kill the existing ones which were built a century ago for much fewer people.

Festival of flamingos in Mumbai and waste management

Flamingos have their largest population in the world on the lakes of East Africa. There is a permanent population of about 2 million in that region. In India their concentration is mostly in the salt deserts of the Rann of Kutch. Mumbai has seen these migratory birds only since the 1990s, and thereby lies a story of sustainability!

As the city grew in the '70s and '80s, so did the volume of untreated sewage in the Thane Creek nurturing the algae that is a staple food of flamingos. So their presence kept increasing and reached an astounding 1,30,000 in the winter of 2022. So, here is an interesting case of pollution generated by individual and civic neglect (untreated sewage) proving a boon for the birds. Strange are the ways of nature because the same pollution has been lethal for fish. Nearly half the species of fish in the creek disappeared between the 1980s to the year 2000.

Look at another aspect. Mangroves—that zealously guarded crucial barrier against soil erosion are now growing rapidly into the sea and making the creek narrower. Exponential increase in the number of these gorgeous visitors to Mumbai is truly a blessing. I hope that the flamingo sanctuary continues to thrive. It might have happened as an accidental marvel but it would be great if our planners and environmentalists can agree on logical steps and ensure that it can continue in an exclusive zone and, at the same time, fish diversity is unharmed. I am confident the scientists will find answers.



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Anyway, ‘festival of flamingos’ is just a pleasant interlude; let me now address the bigger issue of waste management. It is a shame that some of us are utterly callous about throwing out waste materials that end up in the sea—or add to the growing mountains of trash, paradoxically called landfills. But with recent rising concerns about sustainability there is hope that this criminal activity will reduce and humanity will become more concerned about Mother Earth—our only home in the enormous universe.

It is estimated that every urban citizen in the country generates about 600 grams of solid waste every single day. Considering that a lot of our population lives in villages and probably has lesser access to modern day packaging—despite the small-pack onslaught of shampoo, soap, tooth paste, biscuits, et al, by aggressive FMCG companies—and are also unlikely to waste food, our national per capita waste generation should be around 250 grams per day.

With an estimated population of 142 crores, it adds up to about 355 tons a day or 130 million tons annually—enough to drown us all under its weight, unless we make it our religion to manage our waste by assiduously segregating it at source

Simple little things that can save us from very big problems

There is much more to sustainability than a few verticals discussed by me—personal attire and binge shopping, agriculture, construction industry’s greed, and waste management. For instance, there is the serious issue of rapidly reducing marine biodiversity—sea food being a staple for many nations. There is an interesting concept of ‘previously loved clothes’ that is getting traction amongst the younger generation—this makes eminent sense as against hoarding of clothes discussed in the beginning of this paper.

Another new thinking is about food miles ie, how much does our food travel from where it is grown till it reaches our table? Every extra kilometre our food travels add to the harmful emissions. This is bound to throw out of the window the rich man’s habit of consuming imported fruits and vegetables and we might learn to stick to produce grown near where we live.

Finally, we must start teaching children about sustainability; they can really be our sustainability ambassadors and can influence their parents and neighbourhood about the right practices. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Krishan Kalra is a past president of AIMA and member, BOG IIMC. He is Trustee, Climate Project Foundation India.



Yash Chital



A simple, mental exercise

Approaching work when your team is remote can feel like trudging through the woods without a map. There's information overload across several platforms—Slack, Microsoft, SharePoint, Dropbox, Box, Google Drive, Notion, and, of course, email. There are different points of contact across the company and team members simultaneously working on various aspects of a project or deliverable.

To help you find your way through the thickets of your workplace, we developed the Remote Works Blueprint, a simple, four-step process that works in any situation, from a small project to an intricate multi-team product launch. It can take a few minutes, a few hours, or a few days to complete based on the level of complexity of the task.

The Remote Works Blueprint takes the fundamentals of most project management processes, from agile to lean, and distills it into a few steps, regardless of the type of project at hand.

■ Step 1: Set clear goals

First things first. Where do you want to go? Here are a few questions that can help crystallise your project-specific goals and objectives:

1. How does this project help us accomplish our team's overall mission?
2. What do we plan to do?
3. What will change if this project or team succeeds?
4. What does 'done' look like?
5. How will we measure success?

We recommended keeping it simple. Focus on one goal at a time and make it easy to remember. When possible, try to use familiar tools and methods for tracking. This may sound obvious, but as we know, it is a fundamental law that nature always moves from order to disorder. You need to make conscious decisions to quell the chaos.

■ Step 2: Create a task list

Once you have a goal in mind, it is time to take inventory of what everyone

is already working on before you can add new tasks related to the goal. This is to account for what is on everyone's plates; if you skip this step, you are bound to have too much work—leaving teams tired and stressed, which will most likely result in mediocre results and missed deadlines.

We recommend having everyone on the team list and divide their tasks into two categories:

- **Business-as-usual tasks:** These are all the routine tasks and existing activities your team is currently (or will be) doing that overlap with the new goal.
- **Blueprint tasks:** This is a forward-thinking list where you brainstorm all the necessary steps to accomplish your new goal.

Remember, this isn't the time to constrain yourself. The longer the list, the more fun it is to cross things off later (at least, it is for me).

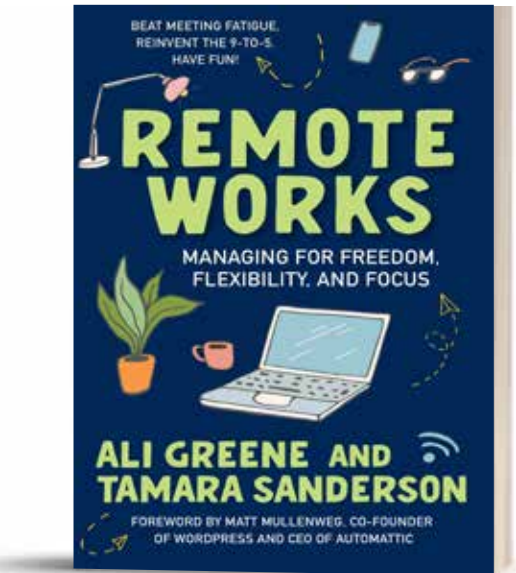
■ Step 3: Determine top priorities

Now it is time to re-evaluate the goal you set in Step 1 and the task list you developed in Step 2. With a critical eye, start prioritising what really matters.

We recommend using the exercise 'Stay', 'Start', 'Stop', 'Shift' to help you prioritise:

- **Stay:** These are business-as-usual tasks that need to continue during the new project.
- **Start:** These are tasks you need to start pronto to accomplish your new goal.
- **Stop:** These are tasks that take a lot of time and are out of scope.
- **Shift:** These are tasks that need some tinkering. You may want to automate them, delegate them to another team member, or outsource them to a contractor.

After prioritising your team task list using the 'Stay, Start, Stop, Shift' exercise, we recommend using a simple three-point scale—such as low, medium, and high—



to indicate urgency, or a chronological prioritisation—like now, near, and far—to decide where to get started.

■ Step 4: Assign ownership, set expectations, and agree on accountability

Finally, it is critical to get clarity on who will be doing what and when by assigning ownership, setting expectations (especially, around deadlines), and agreeing on accountability. By completing this step, you can track progress along the way and help with any roadblocks.

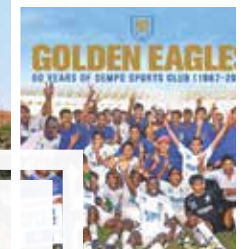
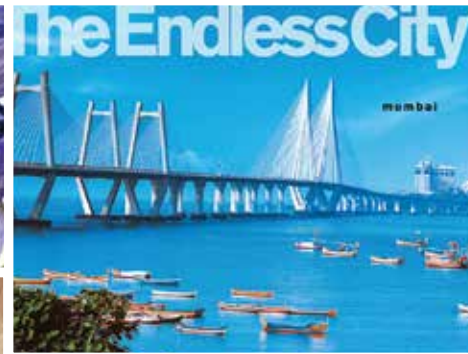
In conclusion

While this might seem like a lot, we promise, it becomes second nature. And it is a must for remote teams. Do not get bogged down in the details or the how-to. Eventually, the Remote Works Blueprint can become a simple, mental exercise you run through before kicking off a project rather than a methodical process you complete step by step. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tamara (Tam) Sanderson is the co-founder of Remote Works. Tamara is also co-author, *Remote Works: Managing for Freedom, Flexibility, and Focus*.



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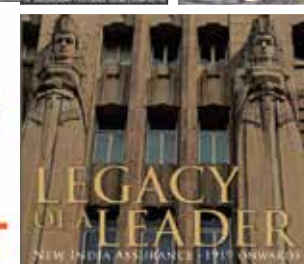
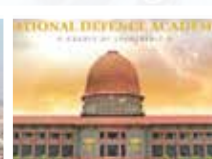
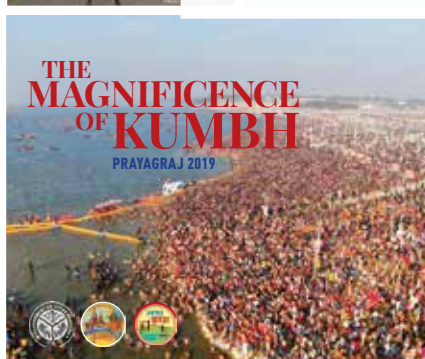
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Detailed, yet concise

Vertical communication in an organisation heralds flow of communication between superiors and subordinates (both upward and downward) in day-to-day activities. Numerous methods and theories have been developed over years for eloquent vertical communication in organisations; nevertheless, a great Indian epic, *Ramayana*, holds timeless leadership and management lessons, particularly regarding communication. Managers, business communicators, and leaders can draw a slew of valuable inspirations and insights from *Ramayana*. Among them, two lessons—one on upward communication and another on downward communication—are of great virtue to imbibe.

Clear and predictive downward communication

A leader with no or scarce communication skills can never be successful. This anonymous saying highlights how communication is crucial in leadership. A leader is someone who becomes the face of the management among the employees. If he is good at

communicating with employees, he can form excellent teams, maintain a propitious organisational culture, and can yield results.

You might not have heard about cases of mission failure in security forces owing to lack of communication; even if you did, such cases would be few. Line organisations such as army, police, and other security forces cannot afford to have miscommunication, because it can have serious to catastrophic consequences. Therefore, the leaders in such organisations maintain clear thinking and pass on explicit directions to their subordinates.

Upon choosing Hanuman to visit Lanka to look for Sita, Lord Rama told him what was to be done once he saw her. As Hanuman had never seen her before, by sharing fine details of Sita such as her characteristics and appearance, Rama guided Hanuman on how to identify her. Rama had anticipated that Sita may refuse to talk to Hanuman since she did not know him. Hence, Rama gave his ring to Hanuman, which he could show to Sita as proof that the ring was indeed sent by Rama and that Hanuman was on Rama's side. Additionally, Rama also shared with Hanuman incidents that were only known to Sita, apart from Rama himself, which would further enhance Hanuman's credibility. This



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is an epitome of downward communication: the boss (Rama, in this case) makes his aim (of what to tell Sita) clear to his subordinate (Hanuman) when he assigns him the job. Secondly, he predicts the kind of issues that may arise when his subordinate would embark on the mission and prepares him accordingly.

Straight and succinct upward communication

Upward communication paves the way for managers to get the desired results as well as feedback on scope for improvement. It helps maintain mutual trust, enhances workplace culture, and makes the employees feel valued.

Unlike English, Tamil and Hindi are verb-final languages. This means, in Tamil and Hindi, a sentence generally starts with subject, followed by object, and ends with verb. These are known as SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) languages. But this rule is often broken during critical situations to get the message across, by communicators who are

fluent with the language. For instance, the great Kambar—a Tamil poet who authored the Tamil version of *Ramyana*, contravenes the structure of the language, especially in the *Sundara Kandam*. Hanuman, upon returning from Lanka after meeting Sita, immediately reported to Lord Rama.

Here, the author could have used the regular language structure (S–O–V: I–Sita–Seen), but it could have led to confusion or misinterpretation. But, knowing that Hanuman intended to convey his message in a concise and clear manner, Kamabar used the action verb in the beginning of the sentence. He started the sentence as “*Kanden Seethaiyai*,” which translates to ‘Seen Sita’.

Hanuman came straight to the point without confounding Rama. Not just that, Hanuman also composed his message keeping the receiver in mind, which is another significant aspect in communication. These are classic examples of how communication should be: straight, clear, and succinct. ■



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