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THINKING TIME

Pause. Reflect. Lead



A 'THINKING' PAUSE
Caroline Taylor

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TO LEAD
LIKE A
WOMAN

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Watch your thinking time

Suneeta Reddy is Managing Director, Apollo Hospitals Enterprise Ltd.

No leader would deny the need for quiet reflection to clear the head, identify the truth behind the facts, and find epiphanies. Yet, too many leaders succumb to the pressure of budgets and targets and exhaust all their time trying to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent

Being too busy to have time to think is often a delusion of self-importance and sometimes just a defence against impostor syndrome.

Not making time for introspection, looking at the big picture, distilling insights, and coming up with new ideas inevitably leads to strategic errors and erosion of leadership. There can be no excuse for not having time to reflect.

In the pre-work-life balance days, leaders would typically show up at the office towards the end of the workday, often after long lunches or rounds of golf, and hold back loyal colleagues until late in the evening for gossip and planning. The late start to the day gave leaders time to think before work, albeit at a cost to others. Now, 24/7 calls, emails, and chats have replaced the after-hours adda and made leaders information-rich but thought-poor.

In these times of great volatility, change, and uncertainty, leaders need to think, unthink, and rethink continuously. There are no lasting best practices or strategies in this era, and it is self-harming to stick to beliefs and behaviours that were previously rewarded.

The growing complexity of the economic and political environment, radical changes in business technologies and models, and rapidly emerging opportunities and competition require leaders to act thoughtfully, not just react quickly.

Thinking creatively and thoroughly is essential for a leader to be more effective when innovation is fundamental to business. To paraphrase early IBM CEO Thomas J. Watson, thinking is responsible for every advance since time began, and thinking has never cost millions of dollars. Watson also said that leaders do not get paid for working with their feet alone, and thought is the basis of success in any business.

No leader would deny the need for quiet reflection to clear the head, identify the truth behind the facts, and find epiphanies. Yet, too many leaders succumb to the pressure of budgets and targets and exhaust all their time trying to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Control cravings and performance anxiety make them find comfort in endless meetings and messages. They end up substituting meaningful action with mind-numbing activity.

Working hard is never a substitute for working well. Durable leaders tend to spend less time holding court and issuing diktats and more on learning and thinking. Today's 16-hour busy leaders could learn from Henry Ford's insight: the more you think, the more time you have.

It is vital for leaders to schedule thinking

Creating time for thinking during the workday requires minimising activities that consume a lot of energy but produce mostly heat and little movement. There can be policies to limit meetings, emails, and chats to actions and restrict reporting and discussions to interactions among those directly responsible for the results

time in their daily and weekly calendars. The business habit of scheduling and structuring everything can be extended to reflection and learning. Structured thinking also allows

one to believe that they are doing something productive, rather than just escaping work.

Electronic intelligence, aka AI, is a huge help for those who fear reading, thinking, and imagining for themselves. Various AI technologies offer to perform all kinds of analysis, composition, prediction, and innovation based on the data provided. For the shy and the diffident, AI offers a sounding board for ideas and can even formulate both the questions and the answers.

Still, for all its power in sifting and manipulating data, AI offers limited help to leaders in making judgement calls. AI-powered leaders still need to hone their instincts, intuition, and judgement to take responsibility for the final action. That requires leaders

to find time to process AI's analysis and advice and think of ways to improve upon the increasingly commoditised machine wisdom.

Creating time for thinking during the workday requires minimising activities

that consume a lot of energy but produce mostly heat and little movement. There can be policies to limit meetings, emails, and chats to actions and restrict reporting and discussions to interactions among those directly responsible for the results. The frequency and duration of discussions in large groups, which often degenerate into durbars, can be restricted. Leaders must have time to think and learn privately, and so should everyone else in the organisation.

Time is a continuously vanishing resource and cannot be retrieved when needed. This era demands enhanced intellectual capacity to maintain clear perception and generate consequential ideas every day. Only clarity of thought and effective innovations can guarantee a future for both the leader and the organisation. 

The opinion expressed is personal.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Juggling packed calendars, endless emails, and back-to-back meetings, leaders can easily get caught up in the urgency of 'doing' things. But in all the noise, something vital often gets lost—the time to think.

Thinking time is not just a luxury. It gives leaders the space to zoom out, reflect, and look beyond the immediate problems. In these quiet pockets, away from the rush, real clarity starts to emerge.

As the world moves faster and faster, becoming more complex, leaders cannot just make straightforward decisions, without getting into the nuances and specifics of the situation. There are no quick answers. Leaders need to consider the long-term view, weigh the ripple effects of their choices, and align their actions with what truly matters.

Some of the best ideas come when you least expect them—while sipping coffee in the balcony, during a quiet walk, a pause between meetings, or when just relaxing. Thinking time sparks creativity, reveals blind spots, and helps leaders connect dots that others may miss.

Caroline Taylor, Managing Director, The Oxford Group and co-author, *The Neglected Acts of Leadership*, writes in the cover story of this issue, "Your personal thinking time may, well, feel different. It may consist of you being in a familiar spot, at home or in the office, perhaps out for a walk with nothing to write on, or in a coffee shop watching the world go by with all its distractions." There is no right or wrong way to go about thinking time..

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

Maneck Davar
Maneck Davar

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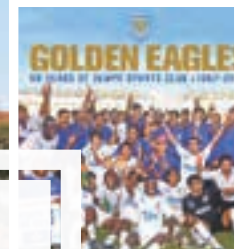
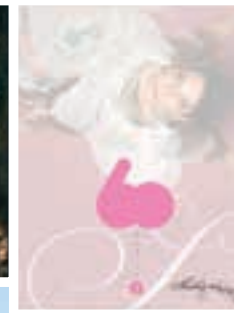
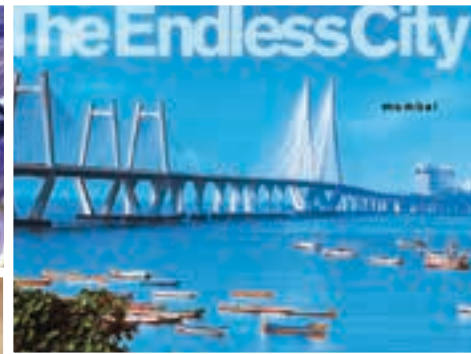
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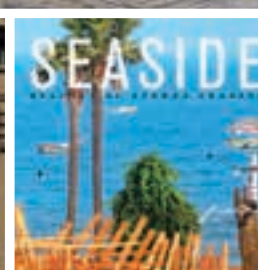
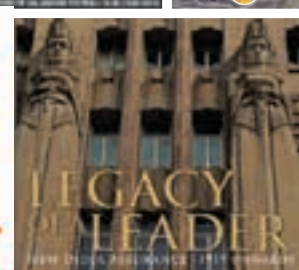
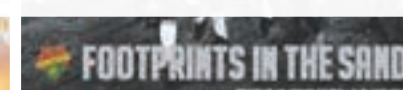
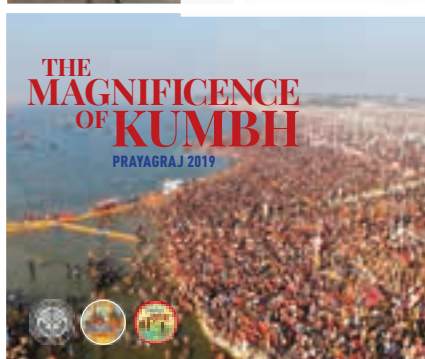
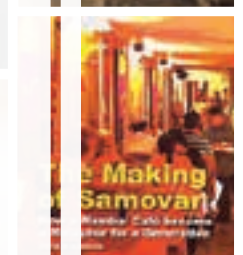
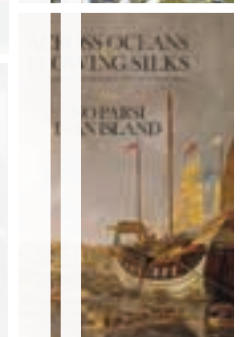
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STRATEGIC TIMEOUT





Armaan Hoyvov

A 'thinking' pause

Leaders who prioritise thinking time can enhance strategic decision-making, foster innovation, and lead more effectively, balancing urgency with foresight.

♦ CAROLINE TAYLOR, CO-AUTHOR, *THE NEGLECTED ACTS OF LEADERSHIP*

out how to respond.

This is about the space in which new solutions and ideas come through, where you move past easy assumptions, question the status quo, and imagine alternatives. Where you have the moments of clarity about what you can do to realise your future potential. The chance to spend time in a calmer space in which your leadership skills are fully primed to prevent crises because you plan ahead, remove the combustibles and invest in the relationships and networks you need.

It also includes thinking time for yourself—deliberate moments when you can reflect on your experiences and recognise you can gain learning and insight that can make you stronger, wiser and more effective for the next time. This time should be an integral part of any leader's regular and legitimate activity. Most leaders agree—in principle, at least. When asked if they'd like more thinking time, they respond resoundingly with 'yes'. Nobody disagrees that more time to think is essential. So, why is thinking time a neglected leadership act?

The leaders of today are constantly thinking. They think about what people need from them during back-to-back meetings, reacting in the face of fast-flowing new information, making quick decisions, calculating and recalculating their priorities as they try to work out which fires to fight—and all before they return to their digital devices to think about how many emails they can reply to or missed calls they can return in the five minutes before their next engagement.

It is no wonder many leaders struggle to carve out thinking time, despite recognising its importance. We hear leaders say their schedule leaves them feeling that they're down in the weeds. They often add that it's actually a temporary phase brought about because, post-COVID, their organisation experienced a leakage of key personnel, or because there is another change that demands their attention. They might say they just need to get their current project over the line or get to year-end, and then miraculously, a clean and clear diary will emerge, allowing them to be forward-thinking, strategic, zen. The problem is that this perfect zen state never materialises.

There are pressures and prejudices that trap organisations and their people in this limit cycle. There is also the lingering power of busyness as a status symbol, identified

The neglect of thinking time in leadership refers to the lack of space for deeper, more exploratory and reflective thinking—less driven by urgency, more intentional, and extending well beyond the present moment, into the future.

The kind of thinking that allows leaders to contemplate the challenges, opportunities, and complexities that lie ahead of them and to work

by Adam Waytz, who shares the story of a man who immigrated to the United States and soon came to believe that the word ‘busy’ meant ‘good’ because when he asked people, “How are you doing?” they often responded, “Busy.”¹

In the rush of daily work demands and relentless distractions, we often find ourselves overwhelmed, our mental clarity drained. We hesitate about being more strategic, and we attach value both to busyness and to ourselves as being busy (and therefore surely important and indispensable) people. All this drives us to keep our attention focused on the now.

Surely, even in the face of demanding agendas and short-term pressure, it should be possible to block out some time in the diary, turn down the volume and begin? In our experience, it is more complicated than that, and we have identified a series of three main tensions at play that prevent leaders from taking that first concrete and constructive step, as outlined below.

Tension 1: To think or to do

How will anything get done if I am always over here, thinking? When their teams are drowning in work, leaders tell us they feel guilty—even self-indulgent—if they take time away. It’s a limit cycle. Leaders remain ever present in case their teams need support, decisions, organisational knowledge or the removal of blockages. Team members become accustomed to having constant access to leaders and view them as the primary source of everything.

In this scenario, your leadership impact is instant. You have a unique and pivotal role, serving as the linchpin for your team’s achievements and outcomes. No one can do what you do.

We have a belief that everyone who comes to work wants to do a good job. Why then, when you can see the difference you make by staying in the centre of your team, would you want to disrupt this pattern of behaviour? To complicate things further, sometimes you are right to be

there. This brings us to our next tension.

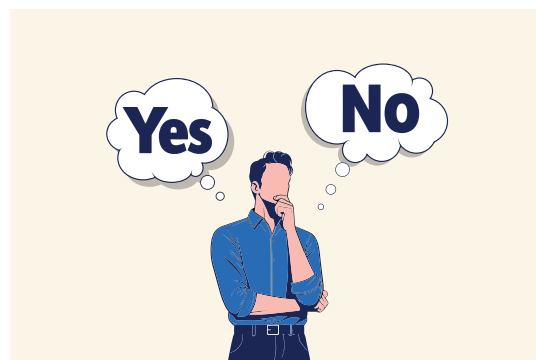
Tension 2: When to think and when to do

Should I drive action in the moment or contemplate essential questions about the future? We’ve been influenced by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linksy’s work on adaptive leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.² They use the metaphor of leaders being on the dance floor – in the midst of the action—and then moving deliberately to the balcony, where a broader, longer view is possible.

The dance floor is the space for the busyness of the day to day. It is the space where you work in the organisation as opposed to on it. You live in the high-pressure moments, reacting to one challenge here, reprioritising there, or at a moment’s notice, stepping in because of an unexpected crisis. This busyness can become addictive and distracting.

Heifetz, Grashow and Linksy advocate moving from the dance floor to the balcony as a vital leadership practice. The perspective from the balcony enables leaders to see what’s coming towards them from a distance, and to observe patterns and systems in their environment.

We also need to acknowledge that there are times when the dance floor is exactly the right place for you to be. On the dance floor, if you are an observant leader, you can gain live insight and understanding of the context you, your team and your colleagues operate in. It is a place



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With limited hours in the day, there's a danger that leaders spread themselves too thinly. They try to do everything, be all things to all people, and therefore, do not make great decisions about when to step out onto the balcony

where great, spontaneous conversations with team members happen that help build trust and understanding. People feel heard and seen by you, and your presence and visibility

have a positive effect on the quality of the work environment. In that moment, you may be exactly the right person to make a decision; to provide some clarity for the day; or to solve a problem, based on your experience, that would take a team member a week to resolve.

Time on the balcony and time on the dance floor are not in competition and needn't be mutually exclusive. Both can be helpful and productive places to be. What's needed is the judgement in how to divide your time to get the best of both. With limited hours in the day, there is a danger that leaders spread themselves too thinly. They try to do everything, be all things to all people, and therefore, do not make great decisions about when to step out onto the balcony. It is when people arrive on the balcony or the thinking path that we find our third tension emerging.

Tension 3: What to think about

Now I'm up here on the balcony and can see for miles, where do I start? When you legitimise thinking time as a leadership activity, you commit yourself to explicit work. If you are accustomed to being knee-deep in the busyness of the day-to-day, a conscious effort is required to reorient yourself to a different way of being and doing. You also need to make a deliberate shift in mindset, from viewing thinking time as some sort of mystical activity, to recognising thinking time as a powerhouse of innovation and

productivity in an engine room of ideas.

Our experience of thinking time often comes from formalised and cooperative settings, for example, the retreat or the 'away day'. You may be familiar with spacious rooms, an enticing coffee and pastries selection, responding to a set agenda, rich conversations with colleagues, an abundance of colourful Post-it notes and a wall full of flip charts. Here you develop ideas as a team, appreciate alternative points of view and debate respectfully. You might also be accustomed to working with a coach, whose role is to help you think, using well-honed questions and attentive listening to enable you to reflect, imagine, analyse, take action.

Environments like this are designed to be stimulating, productive, safe and focused. Interestingly, participants often tell us that they are just as tired after an away day or an appointment with their coach as they are after a typical day working flat out at their usual relentless pace.

Your personal thinking time may, well, feel different. It may consist of you being in a familiar spot, at home or in the office, perhaps out for a walk with nothing to write on, or in a coffee shop watching the world go by with all its distractions. There is no right or wrong way to go about thinking time.

The clear message is: if you want to exercise choice, discretion, and judgement on where your time is spent rather than allowing yourself to be limited, then it is time to act. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Taylor is Managing Director, The Oxford Group. She is also co-author, *The Neglected Acts of Leadership*.

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- 1A Waytz, *The Power of Human – How our shared humanity can help us create a better world* (WW Norton & Company, 2019)
- 2R Heifetz et al., *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2009)



A true sensei

The word ‘sensei’ is often translated simply as ‘teacher’. But does this definition fully capture what a sensei truly represents? In the context of Lean transformation and organisational excellence, the term goes far beyond its literal translation. To better understand the depth and diversity of a true teacher’s role, we can look to ancient Sanskrit classifications, which offer nuanced distinctions between different kinds and levels of educators.

Lessons from the Toyota Production System

The Toyota Production System (TPS) is a prime example of a company’s relentless pursuit of improvement. Over the decades, Toyota has refined its processes to better meet customer needs, tackling countless challenges along the way. While many consultants and coaches achieve incremental improvements using ‘Lean Principles’, their results rarely match the transformative outcomes that Toyota has consistently demonstrated—both in operational efficiency and financial performance.

Why is that? Because true Lean

transformation requires more than tools and techniques. It demands deep, practical insight and the kind of hands-on guidance that only a seasoned sensei can offer.

Beyond tools and templates

Organisations often engage trainers, consultants, or teachers to guide them on their Lean journey. However, the impact of these efforts is directly tied to the capability and experience of the guide. You cannot simply replicate Toyota’s success by copying its methods—every business operates in a unique context. Customer expectations, regulatory environments, geographical and political conditions, internal culture, talent availability, and leadership mindset all vary significantly.

This is why templated approaches and tool-based modules typically deliver limited results. A successful Lean journey must be tailored to the specific challenges and opportunities of the organisation. It takes a true sensei—someone who has led real transformation from within—to navigate this complexity.

The Sanskrit lens: Types of teachers

The richness of the Sanskrit tradition offers a

The most impactful sensei is the one who has personally led transformations—preferably from the CEO’s chair or another high-impact operational role

powerful framework for understanding the different roles a teacher can play:

1. **Adhyapak:** The one who provides information.
2. **Upadhyaya:** The one who imparts knowledge, integrating information meaningfully.
3. **Acharya:** The one who teaches skills and practical application.
4. **Pandit:** The one who offers deep insights into a subject.
5. **Dhrishtha:** The one with a visionary perspective who teaches others to think critically and creatively.
6. **Guru:** The one who awakens inner wisdom and leads the learner from ignorance to

understanding.

A true sensei in the Lean context often embodies several, if not all, of these roles. They are not just educators—they are visionaries, mentors, and change agents.

The rare quality of a true sensei

The most impactful sensei is the one who has personally led transformations—preferably from the CEO’s chair or another high-impact operational role. This hands-on experience at the helm of a conventional company undergoing Lean transformation offers a depth of understanding that cannot be replicated by theoretical knowledge alone.

Such individuals are rare, but they possess a unique blend of experience and wisdom. They are not just instructors—they are acharyas, pandits, dhrishtas, and gurus, all in one. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sanjeev Baitmangalkar is Founder and Principal Consultant, Stratmann Consulting.



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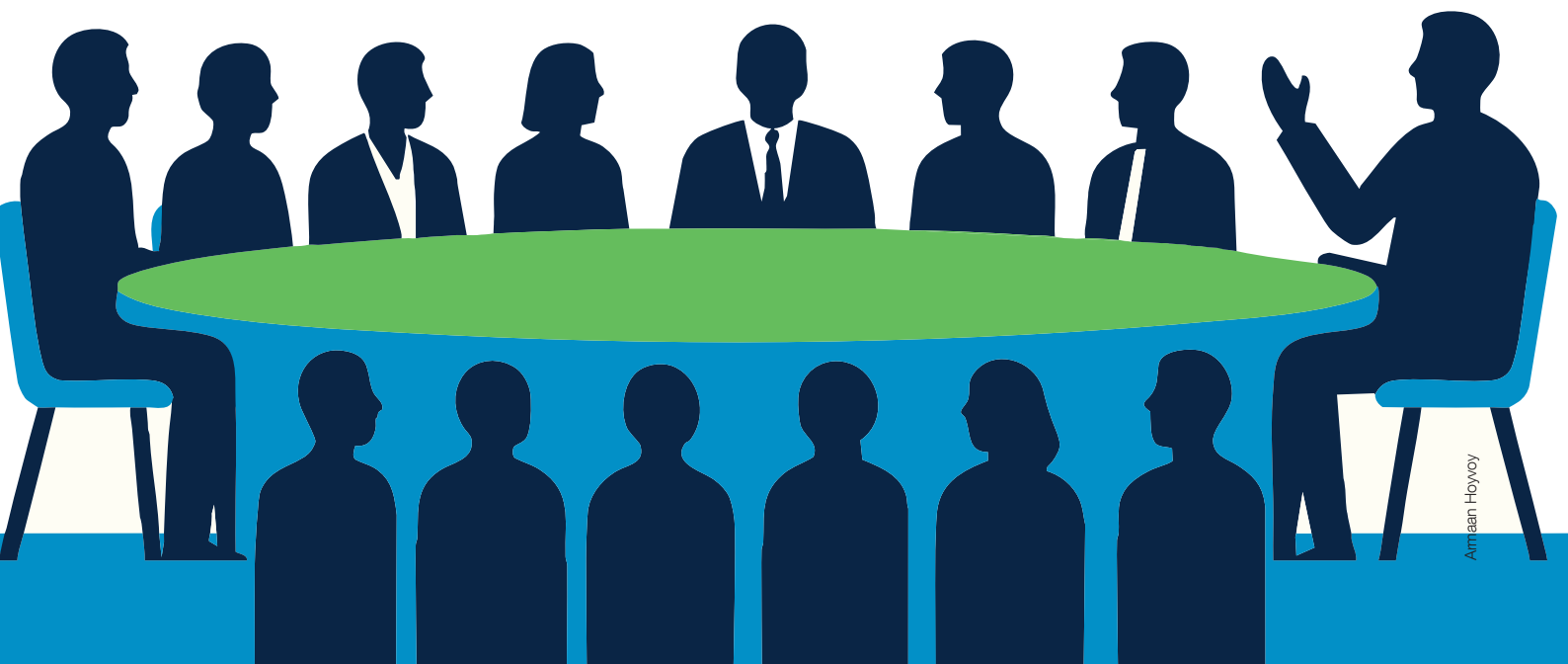
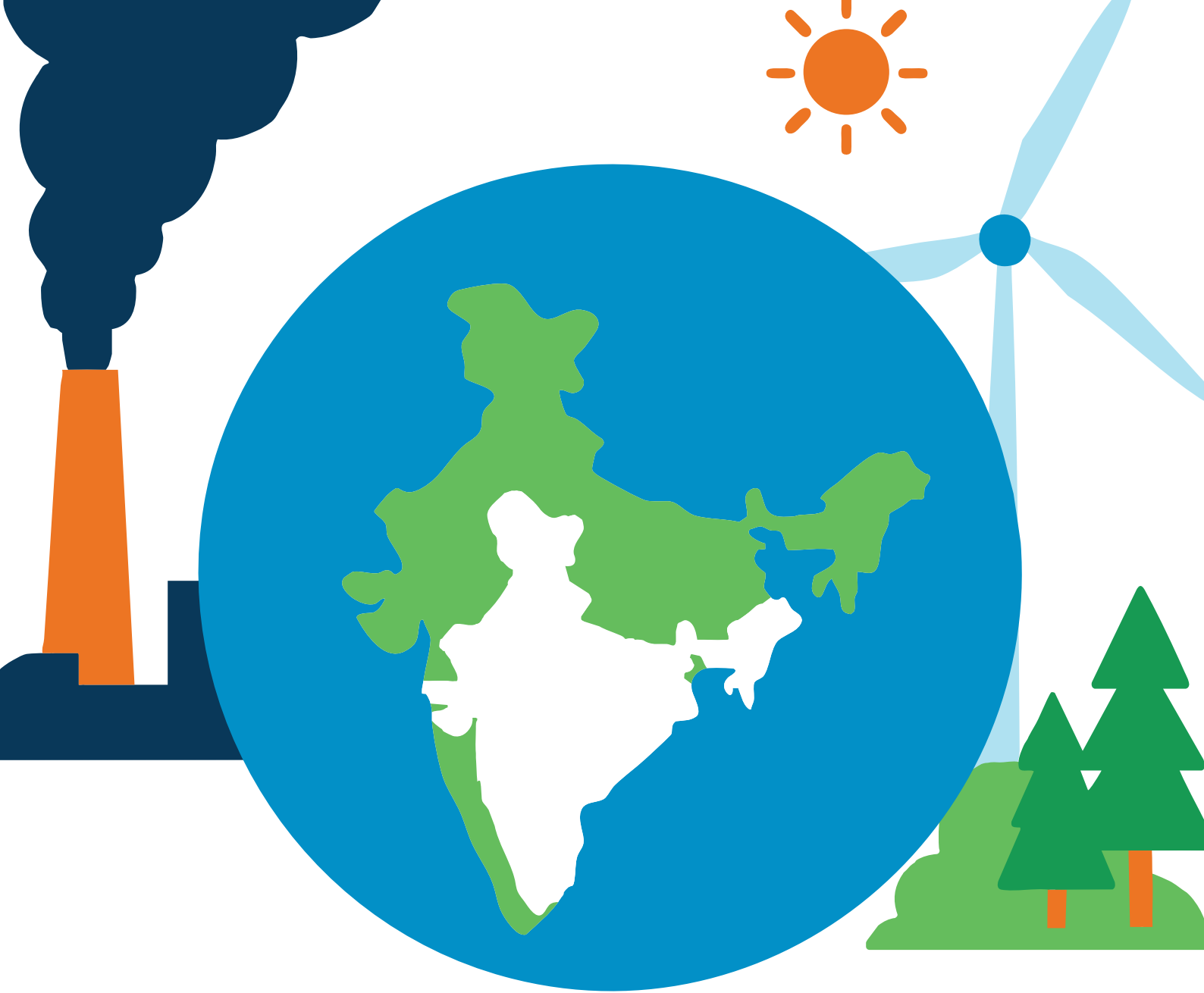


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Despite lofty promises, COP-29 ended in disappointment, with little progress on climate finance and a stark failure to address the needs of developing nations facing worsening climate crises.

SUSTAINABILITY

♦ KRISHAN KALRA, CLIMATE PROJECT FOUNDATION INDIA

Conference of empty promises

COP-29 at Baku has come to an end, and like the earlier 28, it has not achieved much. Barring some agreements on energy storage and transmission grids there is very little to celebrate in the face of ever-increasing climate disasters. What happened on the last day—24 November—was quite ugly; “Not just a failure but a betrayal” to quote LDC (least developed countries) Group’s comments. Despite India seeking the floor to speak, before the deal was adopted, host country President Mokhtar Babayev brazenly gaveled through that “Rich nations would mobilise \$300B per annum by 2035, from a wide variety of sources.” ‘11 years for raising this abysmally poor and paltry sum’ sounds like a cruel joke. India immediately junked the “Stage-managed deal through unfair means.” Other developing countries also echoed similar comments; they were looking up to India—as the leader of ‘global south’—for getting them the needed—and demanded at the beginning of the conference—commitment of \$1.3 T per annum from now. All these protests were merely taken on record.

India has indeed shown an excellent track record, being the only G-20 nation progressing satisfactorily on achieving the Paris agreement

goals. 500 GW of renewable energy by 2030, leading the International Solar Alliance initiative, push on EVs, strong programme for improving energy efficiency in industry are all admirable demonstrations of our work. India has shown the world that sustainable development and economic growth can co-exist.

Of course, some countries gave the meagre assurance a standing ovation. EU’s Climate envoy made a self-congratulatory statement—“COP29 will be remembered as the start of a new era in Climate Finance. EU will continue to lead and we are confident that the ambitious and realistic goal of \$1.3 T annually will be achieved.” (Author’s take: very unlikely, sir, with the shameful start totally disproportionate to the scale of the crisis). With the presence of many fossil fuel czars as VIP guests of the host country and their opening speech in praise of “Fossil fuels as a gift of God”, in any case, not much was expected from Day 1 of the long confabulations. The 30-km-long marina in Baku has ample space for dumping a lot of elaborate agendas and conference speeches!

Beginning with the first COP (Conference of Parties) at Berlin in 1995—as the apex decision making body under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) following 1997’s Kyoto Protocol—signed by about 200 countries—aimed at

ensuring guarantees from all nations for reduction of emissions and monitoring progress thereafter as well as securing commitments for funds from the rich nations for helping developing countries to make the transition from fossil energy to renewable sources. The altruistic objective was to limit the warming of the planet to 1.5 degrees, beyond which there are serious threats to human and animal/marine life, health concerns, and food security for the world! Sadly, the progress has been extremely slow. All 29 COPs, held around the world, have been grand affairs, attended by thousands of delegates including heads of state and governments—and the ever-increasing number of protesters outside the conference venues—eloquent speeches, ceremonial pageantry, voluminous agendas, protracted negotiations, glittering banquets, bilateral meetings on the side...but the vexed question ‘Who should shell out the trillions of dollars needed for the energy transition?’ hasn’t been solved.

At Baku, UN Secretary General commented on the exercise as “Master Class in Climate Destruction”. Indeed 2024 is likely to see 1.3 per cent jump in global emissions (source: UNEP report 2023) and, at this rate—with \$60 B annual global spend on searching for new oil and gas reserves—Mother Earth and all of us will be roasted with a 3.1-degree increase by the year 2100.

To be fair, the UK is committed to a whopping 81 per cent reduction in emissions over the 1990 level by 2035. The island nation has already closed its last coal-based power plant and also hopes to see gas plants totally phased out by 2030. They are going to ban new licenses for the exploration of coal and gas deposits.

I must also mention here that, in 1985, a British Antarctic Survey had first discovered the gaping hole in Earth’s Ozone Layer which led to the 1987 Montreal Meeting and the protocol signed (as of date) by 197 countries, is considered as the most successful unanimous

environmental global action so far. The epic protocol mandated ban on use and production of nearly 100 chemicals which lead to depletion of the Ozone layer. These were used mostly by the air conditioning and refrigeration industries as well for insulation foams—mostly Hydro chlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) and CFCs. At that time, many rich European countries had voluntarily funded, through four organs of the UN system, UNEP, UNDP, UNIDO and World Bank, for replacing these chemicals with others that did not hurt the Ozone layer. I remember my own company receiving funds from UNDP for making the switch of our foaming reagents used in the production of vaccine carriers and cold boxes for the Polio+ campaign.

It is interesting to mention here that USA is the only country that has not ratified both the Montreal and Kyoto protocols. COPs have been held in many countries (including COP 8 in India, in 2002) but never in the US, notwithstanding the irony that in 1990 US accounted for as much as 36 per cent of total global emissions! Now with Trump-2 going berserk with other pursuits, there’s absolutely no chance of this matter getting any attention.

Well-known environmentalist Chandra Bhushan commented, recalling Gandhiji’s critique of the infamous 1942 Cripps Mission by comparing it with “a postdated cheque on a crashing bank”. Chandra says that this perfectly captures the outcome of COP29. He goes on to add, “It is not surprising because the Developed Countries pledged, in 2009, \$100B annually by 2020 and met this target only two years later in 2022 and even then—to add insult to injury—70 per cent of the amount came from multilateral loans at market rates! Expecting trillions from nations that struggled to deliver billions was always unrealistic.” Apparently, a UNEP report mentions that the, “current economic system is actually profiting from the developing countries’ climate vulnerability.” Give them loans (against commitments for grants) and keep them burdened with the



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interest payments. The rich seem to forget that climate change is universal and hurts them, too. Of course, they have the wherewithal to meet the challenges and the poor don't. They also forget that they are the ones who have created the mess with their rapid industrialisation long before the developing countries started giving a push to manufacturing.

To a layman like me, the real stumbling block in all COPs to date is the reluctance of USA and other rich countries to pick up the tab for helping developing countries for phasing out fossil energy. They have always insisted on the biggest GHG (greenhouse gases) emitters as a country/nation—China, USA, India, EU, Russia, Indonesia, Brazil, Japan, Iran, and Canada being the top 10—should put in funds prorated to their emissions and not on per capita basis!

Indeed, we are the third biggest emitter as a country, but, on per capita basis (tons of GHGs), the picture changes drastically. UNEP report 2023 gives the figure of 4,140 in our

case—8 per cent of the world's total—the picture changes drastically. This Achilles Heel has plagued all COPs for three decades—'Emissions Per Capita or Per Country'? Rich nations have done the bulk of the damage through their industrialization—they do not need more of manufacturing activity but developing countries like India have yet to catch up and must continue infrastructure and manufacturing build up which will add to their emissions. The rich are hopelessly callous about their 'historic responsibility'. They have deposited billions of tons of CO₂ in the Earth's atmosphere and are now bickering about the little bit being emitted by the poor.

Here's hoping better sense prevails at COP-30 and the rich agree to be realistic and accept the principle of 'per capita' and contributions on that basis. This is their chance to atone for their past sins. 91–92 per cent of the world population—living in developing countries (83 per cent) and those in extreme poverty (8.5 per cent) will be praying for justice. **IM**



Lynn Blades, founder, Legacy Leadership and author *The Quiet Burn*, and exposes the biggest myths about burnout—and what leaders must unlearn.

Burnout debunked

Time to cut through the noise: burnout is not just about being tired. It is not a phase, a momentary lapse, or something you can talk your way out of. It is a serious, progressive

condition that affects your mind, body, soul, and your ability to lead effectively. Yet, despite a heightened awareness, burnout is still wildly misunderstood, especially among leaders and particularly among the ambitious women I coach.

I've seen far too many high-performing women at the top of their game dismiss the signs, internalise the fatigue, and power through until something breaks. It all looks good to the outside world, cool, calm, polished, achieving, even winning. On the inside they are depleted running on fumes until the tank runs dry. And, it is not just their well-being on the line; it's their relationships, their leadership, their legacy.

So, let us set the record straight. These are the five most persistent myths about burnout—and the hard truths we must face to move beyond them.

MYTH 1: BURNOUT IS JUST STRESS. YOU WILL GET OVER IT.

Truth: When stress is acute it becomes chronic

and corrosive burnout.

We all experience stress. But burnout is what happens when that stress becomes relentless, and your coping mechanisms stop working. It is the moment you stop caring, engaging, focusing not because you're lazy, but because you are empty.

According to a 2022 Gallup report, 76 per cent of employees experienced burnout on the job at least sometimes, and 28 per cent reported feeling burned out 'very often' or 'always'. That is not a bad week. That's a cultural epidemic. For working women, it is one step beyond with 46 per cent of all professional women experiencing some stage of burnout and for those in leadership positions, the number jumps to 53 per cent.

Burnout is not just a mental state. It rewires your nervous system, disrupts hormone regulation, impairs memory, and increases the risk of heart disease. As a coach who has lived through it and now helps others recover from it, I can tell you: burnout is not a blip. It is a breakdown. And it won't go away with a few deep breaths and a Sunday off.

MYTH 2: BURNOUT ONLY HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHO CAN'T HACK IT.

Truth: Burnout disproportionately affects high achievers.

Burnout is not a sign of weakness. It is often a

sign of commitment.

The people most likely to burn out are the ones who care the most. The perfectionists. The overachievers. The relentless go-getters who never miss a deadline and always say yes. Sound familiar? Holding yourself to the standard of perfection means you're striving for the unachievable. I call that an energy vampire.

In my coaching practice, I have seen senior leaders, founders, and top-tier executives crumble, not because they lacked grit, but because they confused endurance with resilience. They were conditioned to push through common sense, ignore discomfort, override warning signs, and put the mission first. This could be seen as admirable until it becomes self-destruction.

Burnout is not about fragility. It is about unsustainable effort without replenishment. And no one is immune.

MYTH 3: AMBITIOUS WOMEN JUST NEED BETTER WORK-LIFE BALANCE.

Truth: Ambitious women do not burn out because they are doing too much; they burn out because they are doing too much for everyone else but themselves.

This one gets personal.

Women, especially black women, women of colour, and those in leadership, are not just navigating workplace demands. They are juggling societal expectations, cultural conditioning, invisible labour, and the pressure to prove themselves time and again. That is not balance, it is burnout in disguise. This standard is completely unrealistic and unachievable without self-sacrifice, and I don't believe in martyrdom.

A McKinsey & LeanIn.org report found that one in three women consider leaving their jobs or downshifting their careers due to burnout, compared to one in four men. Why? Because women are expected to handle it all flawlessly—lead like executives and show up like caregivers. To advocate, empathise, support, outperform—and

smile while doing it.

Superwoman is a comic character. Drop the cape.

I work with women who were top performers, yet still questioned their worth because they aren't "doing enough" at home or didn't volunteer for one more committee. These are not time management issues. They are boundary issues rooted in decades of socialisation.

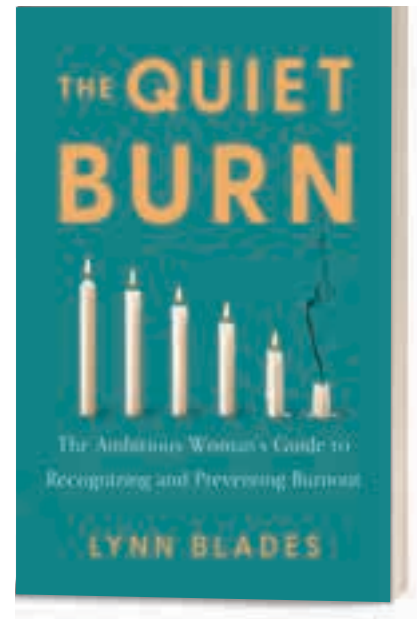
Ambitious women do not need to work harder. They need permission to prioritise themselves without guilt, and leaders who support them when they do.

MYTH 4: YOU JUST NEED A HOLIDAY.

Truth: A vacation might help you recover, but it won't prevent burnout.

I am a believer in time off. But let's stop pretending that two weeks of vacation will fix what a toxic culture took years to break.

Burnout is not about being 'tired'. It is about loss of meaning, chronic exhaustion, and emotional depletion. A vacation can offer temporary relief, but if you return to the same environment,



patterns, and pressures, the cycle restarts. The break is just a starting place that falls flat without a conversation about your workload.

Sabbaticals, digital detoxes, and wellness retreats are useful—but they are not solutions if there is no systemic change. Companies need to build cultures of well-being, not just throw perks at the problem. And leaders need to model rest as a strategic asset so their stakeholders do.

MYTH 5: BURNOUT IS A PERSONAL PROBLEM, NOT A LEADERSHIP ISSUE.

Truth: Burnout is as much about the system as it is the individual.

Let me say this louder for the CEOs in the room: burnout is not just an HR issue. It is a leadership issue, a business issue, a performance issue, and a bottom-line issue.

Burned-out employees are 63 per cent more likely to take sick days, 23 per cent more likely to visit the emergency room, and significantly more likely to quit, according to the World Health Organization. That means burnout is not just costing you productivity, it is costing you people, profit, and purpose.

If your workplace rewards presenteeism, ignores toxic behaviour, or glorifies hustle

culture, you are breeding burnout. If your leadership team runs on fumes and wears burnout like a badge of honour, you're modelling dysfunction.

The antidote? Psychological safety, flexible systems, human-centred leadership, and accountability from the top.

SO, WHAT NOW?

If you recognise yourself, or your workplace culture, in any of these myths, do not panic. Act. The path out of burnout is not paved with platitudes. It requires:

- Rewiring beliefs about worth and productivity.
- Building boundaries that honour your energy.
- Creating work environments that support sustainability.
- Valuing impact over optics.
- And yes, sometimes stepping back to move forward.

As someone who quite literally wrote the book on this, *The Quiet Burn: The Ambitious Woman's Guide to Recognizing and Preventing Burnout*, I promise you, you don't have to burn to be brilliant. There is a healthier, braver, more meaningful way to thrive, not just survive. But it starts with rejecting the myths. **IM**





A pivotal moment

The business world is experiencing a seismic shift as flexible employment and the gig economy redefine the very fabric of work, thrusting organisations and regulatory authorities into uncharted territory. Fuelled by rapid technological leaps, shifting workforce expectations, and global economic currents, this transformation is dismantling traditional employment models and ushering in a dynamic era of autonomy, adaptability, and uncertainty. Companies are now grappling with the challenge of managing a decentralised, diverse workforce—freelancers, gig workers, and remote teams; while navigating the complexities of fluctuating productivity, talent retention, and compliance. Regulatory authorities, meanwhile, face a daunting task: crafting laws that balance innovation with protection, as outdated frameworks struggle to address job insecurity, benefit gaps, and the rise of platform-based power dynamics. This evolving landscape demands bold, creative solutions, forcing businesses to rethink strategies and regulators to pioneer new policies that embrace the opportunities while tackling the risks of this bold new world of work.

The shift to flexible employment and the gig economy

Industrial relations, traditionally built around stable, long-term employment relationships, are changing faster than ever due to the rise of flexible employment and the gig economy. Flexible employment encompasses a range of work arrangements, including part-time, temporary, remote, and freelance work, often facilitated by digital platforms. The gig economy, a subset of this trend, is characterised by short-term contracts and project-based tasks, as opposed to permanent jobs. This transformation is driven by technological advancements, globalisation, and changing workforce preferences, fundamentally altering the employer-employee dynamic.

As further outlined in my conceptual research paper, these new paradigms challenge traditional frameworks of labour relations, unionisation, and legislative protections, presenting both opportunities and risks for workers and employers alike. The gig economy, in particular, has gained traction globally, with India serving as a prominent example. Companies like Zomato, Ola, and Urban Company have leveraged technology to create platforms that employ millions of gig workers, projected to reach 23.5 million by 2030.

The unorganised sector, employing over 90 per cent of India's workforce and the gig economy both exemplify employment outside formal contracts, challenging the applicability of traditional labour laws and union structures

according to the NITI Aayog Report. This shift promises flexibility and autonomy but also raises concerns about job security, benefits, and collective representation, necessitating a re-evaluation of industrial relations systems.

The evolution and triggers of change

The transition to flexible employment has been gradual but accelerated significantly in recent decades. This evolution can be traced to the convergence of technology, economic pressures, and ever-changing workforce demands. The advent of the internet and platforms like Upwork and Fiverr marked the first wave, enabling gig workers to connect with global opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic further catalysed this trend, with a NASSCOM Report noting a post-pandemic increase in gig projects lasting over a year, as organisations sought agility in uncertain times.

In India, 25 per cent of surveyed tech firms expressed a preference for hiring gig workers for longer-term roles, with 53 per cent absorbing them full-time, reflecting a blurring line between gig and traditional employment. Historically, industrial relations relied on predictable employment patterns, with unions negotiating wages and conditions in centralised workplaces. However, the rise of flexible work—spanning the unorganised sector and gig platforms—has disrupted this model.

The unorganised sector, employing over 90 per cent of India's workforce (NCEUS, 2007), and the gig economy both exemplify employment outside formal contracts, challenging the applicability of traditional

labour laws and union structures.

Drivers and implications of flexible work

The shift to flexible employment is driven by two key factors: flexibility and technology. Flexibility appeals to workers seeking autonomy and work-life balance, with a McKinsey report indicating that 70 per cent of independent workers chose gig work for its freedom, not just financial gain. Technology, meanwhile, acts as an enabler, with platforms streamlining access to gig opportunities and app-based models formalising sectors like delivery and home services. However, this comes at a cost. The gig economy exacerbates power imbalances, as employers—or platforms—can hire and fire at will, leaving workers without traditional protections.

For industrial relations, the implications are profound. Unions struggle to organise a decentralised, transient workforce, with membership declining as workers no longer fit the traditional employee mould. Collective bargaining, a cornerstone of labour relations, weakens in fragmented contexts where workers lack a unified employer or long-term affiliation. Additionally, the unorganised sector—characterised by precarious conditions and lack of legal oversight—further complicates industrial relations, as workers are excluded from formal frameworks (ILO, 2021).

Adapting industrial relations to new realities

The transformation of industrial relations requires innovative responses across policy, organisational practices, and worker advocacy. Some of the suitable strategies to mitigate these challenges are as follows:

Legislative adaptation: Governments are redefining labour laws to accommodate gig and flexible workers. In India, the Social Security Code 2020 aims to extend benefits to gig workers, while California's AB5 law reclassifies some freelancers as employees, granting them minimum wage and benefits. Similarly, a UK



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tribunal in 2016 recognised Uber drivers as ‘workers’, not contractors, entitling them to basic rights. These cases illustrate the tension between platform models and traditional laws, pushing for clearer worker classifications.

Union innovation: Traditional unionisation falters in the gig economy, but new approaches are emerging. Digital platforms and social media enable decentralised organising, while initiatives like the Fair Work model rate platforms on worker rights, fostering accountability. Sectoral bargaining, negotiating across entire industries rather than individual firms, offers another avenue to protect dispersed workers.

Policy for the unorganised sector: In the unorganised sector, I suggest strengthening trade union rights, enhancing social security coverage, and improving regulatory frameworks. Promoting informal associations could bridge the gap to formal unions, while technology—such as apps informing workers of rights or delivering benefits—could address enforcement gaps (ILO, 2021).

Redefining employment: The gig economy

blurs traditional employer-employee relationships, with platforms acting as facilitators rather than employers. This necessitates new models of representation and portable benefits, untethered from specific employers, to ensure worker protections.

Real-world applications

In the tech industry, companies like GitLab operate fully remotely, eliminating traditional supervision and conflict resolution structures, yet thriving through flexibility. In contrast, gig platforms like Uber and Lyft face legal battles over worker classification, as drivers attempt to unionise under laws ill-suited to flexible work. In India, the unorganised sector’s street vendors and domestic workers exemplify the challenges of exclusion from industrial relations, surviving without contracts or benefits despite their economic significance.

The future of work and labour relations

Looking ahead, the future of work will likely blend gig, flexible, and traditional employment, driven by AI, automation, and global

Yet, challenges like quality assurance, security checks, and regulatory clarity persist. The future demands a balance between economic agility and social equity. Without adaptation, flexible employment risks widening inequality, eroding labour rights, and diminishing union power. However, with proactive policies—emphasising representation, sustainability, and participation—it could usher in a new era of industrial relations that respects worker dignity while embracing modern dynamism.

The rise of flexible employment and the gig economy marks a pivotal moment for industrial relations. As traditional systems falter under decentralised, technology-driven work,

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The through line connects your values, experiences, and motivations, helping you rediscover your purpose, reignite intrinsic motivation, and understand the leader you're becoming.

♦ ARCHANA MOHAN, AUTHOR, *THE THROUGH LINE*

LEADERSHIP

Intrinsic Motivation

In a world defined by rapid change, complexity, and constant demands, many leaders find themselves drifting away from what truly motivates them. This article introduces the concept of the through line—a personal narrative thread that connects our values, experiences, and motivations—and explores how reconnecting with it can reignite intrinsic motivation. Drawing on the Self-Determination Theory and real-world examples, the piece explains how a clear through line helps leaders navigate change, prevent burnout, and lead with greater clarity, resilience, and authenticity. It offers practical reflection tools to help readers uncover and lead from their own inner compass.

In today's fast-paced, hyper-connected world, it's easy to feel unsteady. We respond to constant demands, chase goals that don't reflect who we truly are, and pursue success defined by others. In the process, we often lose touch with what genuinely drives us. Our sense of intrinsic motivation, that deep inner spark that fuels meaning, growth, and connection, starts to fade.

Yet, intrinsic motivation is what sustains performance over the long run. It keeps us going long after bonuses lose their appeal, and external recognition stops feeling fulfilling.

It fuels resilience during change, creativity in uncertainty, and commitment when the finish line moves farther away. So, how do we reconnect with it?

In my work and in my book *The Through Line*, I explore this question. At its heart lies a simple, powerful idea: each of us has a through line. A steady thread that weaves together our values, experiences, and interests. It's not a fixed goal or singular calling, but a narrative compass. One that helps us understand who we are and how we want to show up in the world—consistent, even as it shifts around us.

Your through line links your identity to your actions. It goes beyond passion or purpose. It's the thread that helps you move through complex situations without losing your sense of direction. It evolves with time, deepens with reflection, and always grows from within. It motivates you not because someone else is watching, but because your choices align with what truly matters to you.

This is not just philosophy; it's grounded in science. In 1977, psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci met at the University of Rochester and began a collaboration that would reshape how we understand human behaviour. Over the following decades, they developed Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which challenged the popular belief that

people are best motivated by rewards and punishments. Instead, they discovered that long-term motivation comes from fulfilling three core needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

When your life aligns with your through line, these needs are naturally met. You begin making choices with intention, not obligation. You stop chasing externally imposed goals and start following your internal compass. That's autonomy. You find yourself gravitating toward areas that spark genuine curiosity and invite you to grow. Not because you must, but because you want to. That's competence. And along the way, you build meaningful connections with people who share your values and aspirations. That's relatedness. Together, these create the conditions for sustained intrinsic motivation.

This dynamic plays out in the workplace too. Many organisations try to spark motivation through incentives, metrics, or vision statements. But true engagement doesn't come from slogans; it comes from meaning. When someone links their day-to-day work with a personal through line, their energy shifts. A team leader whose through line is "enabling growth in others" doesn't need external motivation to mentor colleagues, lead learning initiatives, or create space for team development. That deeper drive is already built in.

In today's leadership landscape, this clarity is more critical than ever. The pace of change is relentless. The challenges are often ambiguous. Leaders are expected to show agility, empathy, and decisiveness, often, all at once. In such a context, your through line acts as an anchor. It helps you stay grounded in who you are, even as your environment evolves. It doesn't give you all the answers, but it gives you the steadiness to keep asking the right questions.

It's important to note that most of us don't "find" our through line in a single flash of insight. We uncover it gradually. We shape it as



we live, reflect, and grow. Sometimes we only see it clearly in hindsight, by looking back at the roles we've played, the values we've held, and the choices that have felt most fulfilling. In a world that, often, rewards hustle over harmony, and visibility over authenticity, your through line might seem quiet or even invisible. But it carries deep power. It shifts your attention from performance to purpose, from reacting to leading, and from burning out to showing up with integrity.

Career transitions are one of the clearest moments where your through line comes into play. A new industry, role, or title can feel destabilising. Familiar metrics disappear. Expectations change. But your through line travels with you. I once worked with a senior marketing executive who left the corporate world to join a non-profit. She described her through line as "storytelling for transformation." That single phrase helped her make sense of her shift. It reminded her that the core of her work, helping people connect to powerful stories, remained intact. Her skill set didn't disappear; it simply took on new



meaning in a different setting.

Your through line is also essential when burnout begins to take hold. Burnout isn't just about working too much. It often arises from value misalignment. When what you're doing no longer reflects who you are, you might be producing results, earning praise, or even hitting big milestones, but you still feel depleted. That's because something inside you is out of sync. Reconnecting with your intrinsic motivation can restore that alignment. It reminds you why your work matters. It helps you move from just coping, to contributing with clarity and purpose.

So how do you begin uncovering your through line?

Start with reflection. Revisit old journals. Talk to mentors. Look back at your career journey and personal milestones. What patterns keep emerging? What themes show up in the moments when you felt most alive? Ask yourself:

- When have I felt deeply fulfilled?
- What values keep resurfacing across different roles or environments?
- What motivates me, and why?

You may not land on the perfect words

immediately, and that's okay. The goal isn't to craft a personal slogan. It's to articulate a meaningful thread that helps you stay connected to your best self over time.

Once you understand, and lead, from your through line, your work starts to feel more aligned. You begin to make better decisions. Not because you have all the information, but because you're guided by what matters most to you. You build stronger teams, because people are drawn to authenticity. And you rediscover the satisfaction of doing work that feels both challenging, and meaningful.

As demands rise and distractions grow louder, your through line becomes even more valuable. It reminds you of what matters—your story, your values, your voice. Not the ones handed to you, but the ones you've chosen. And in a world that can feel overwhelming or fragmented, that kind of clarity is not just rare. It's essential.

In the end, your through line is the quiet thread that pulls you forward. It reminds you where you've come from, why you began, and what kind of leader you're becoming. One who is clear, grounded, and fully, confidently, yourself. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Archana Mohan is author, *The Through Line*.



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