

THE HINDU
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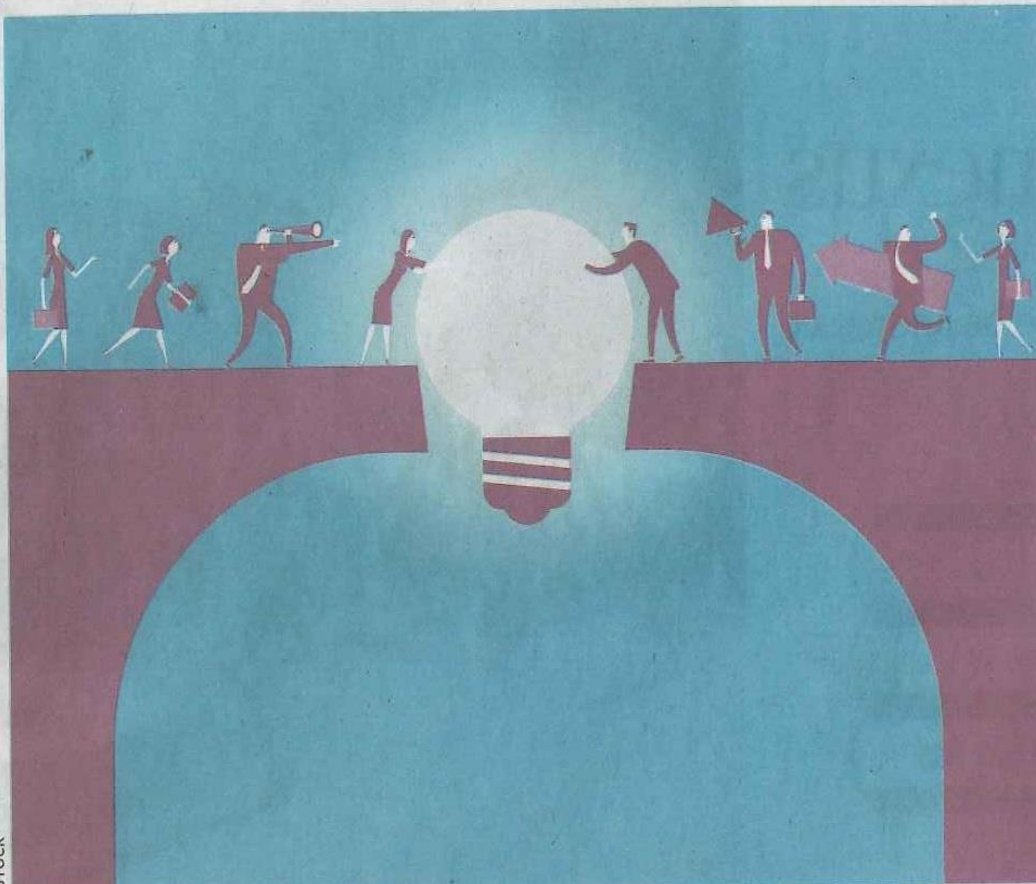
VALUE ADD

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George Kohlrieser had never really intended to be a hostage negotiator; he was more interested in mediation and conflict resolution. However, things changed when he was called into a hospital to help negotiate with a deranged man who was terrorising the staff. Before he could get a sense of what had transpired, Kohlrieser found himself, at the mercy of a psychotic man holding him to ransom, a pair of scissors dangerously positioned against his throat. His initial attempts to make a connection with his captor, Sam, had been futile – the latter was consumed with rage and hatred and had already slashed the throat of a nurse who was bleeding profusely and writhing in pain.

Kohlrieser was increasingly aware of the imminent danger to his life and the lack of options he had. If he was panicking, he did not show it. He reiterated to himself the best possible courses of action he could take – motion to the police present by non-verbal actions or code words, panic, or negotiate. The last possibility seemed bleak – how often does one talk his or her way out of such a situation, witness the win of *raison d'être* over fear, and walk away scot-free? It was a gamble he would have to take. And he did. The breakthrough in the negotiation came with the question, “Sam, how do you want your children to remember you?”

While Sam’s immediate reaction was to scream that he wanted to kill everyone, even as he pressed the scissors harder against Kohlrieser’s throat, the connection had been made. Kohlrieser’s questions to his captor continued relentlessly, and within minutes, the man surrendered, allowed himself to be handcuffed, and led away. “As with all hostage negotiations, the key is to use questions as opposed to telling the hostage-taker what to do,” explains the veteran hostage negotiator, clinical and organisational psychologist, author, speaker, consultant, and professor of leadership and organisational behaviour at the International Institute for Management Development,



Effective negotiation: Connect and communicate; find a common ground.

On a knife-edge

Hostage negotiator and professor, George Kohlrieser shares nail-biting accounts of his cases to elaborate on the leadership and hostage management link

Switzerland. “This incident had a great impact on me as it taught me the importance of transactions, how to turn a negative transaction into a positive one, and how to think of people in terms of enemies becoming allies. You can bond with anyone if you have common ground,” he affirms.

Analogies

What is the link between hostage management and effective leadership? Kohlrieser is quick to answer, “To be a leader, one has to be impactful.

The processes we use in hostage management techniques – which has a success rate of 95% – are strong leadership processes too.” He



George Kohlrieser

draws analogies to physically being held hostage and holding one’s minds and thoughts hostage. “You don’t necessarily have to have a gun to your head – it could be a situation where you are a psychological hostage to a boss, employee, customer, client, colleagues – or even to yourself. Physically

or mentally, being a hostage produces the same result.”

He believes it is important for leaders to understand the significance of never being a hostage to oneself, people or situations. The way forward is to remain calm in the face of adversity and will oneself to ask questions and negotiate. That is the first step towards leading other people effectively.

Mindset

What plays out in the mind’s eye and how an individual’s mindset shapes him or her plays an instrumental role in moulding a leader, explains Kohlrieser. “Too many leaders focus on the negatives as opposed to the opportunit-

ies. The number one reason why leaders do not succeed is their utter inability to connect and communicate with people. Efficacy in communication involves forming a bond with not merely people whom the said leader is comfortable with, but also with those who he or she may not be at ease with.”

Secure base

Kohlrieser believes that one needs a secure base – not necessarily a person. It could be a place or a goal as well. “You begin to see potential solutions to problems when you feel secure. Thus, an effective leader is one who creates a secure base for people. Trust is a fundamental commodity for a leader – a leader who can create trust is one who is most successful.”

However, he warns that secure bases can work both ways – there can be evil secure base leaders too. Kohlrieser cites the example of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) – they attract youngsters who feel left out, and provide them with a secure base. This convinces the vulnerable youngsters that joining the terrorist group is the best option open to them. Consequently, they attach themselves to a cult leader.

He elaborates on how terrorists are trained to create detachment from other humans. He says, when it comes to groups like the IS, the situation has changed. In the 1980s, they were taught depersonalisation – they were asked to butcher an animal they had nurtured, or find a dead baby and behead it. Today, not only are they taught depersonalisation, they are also motivated by strong ideological beliefs that alienate them from others who do not subscribe to similar beliefs.

So, how does hostage negotiation work here? “It isn’t too different,” he ascertains. “If you have a terrorist holding a gun to your head, try out the same techniques as you would in any other hostage situation – attempt to get him to feel some emotion, try to get him to talk. It may not necessarily work, but it is a risk you are going to have to take if you want a shot at survival.”