Essence of
Straight from the Heart

A podcast series by Pragyan Advisory

pragyan®

Leadership I Team I Culture

Pragyan Advisory is a boutique consulting firm that offers consulting solutions in the areas of leadership development, team alignment, and organizational culture. We leverage global research & frameworks, our experience, a community of CEOs/CXOs and our understanding of our heritage & ancient wisdom, to co-create effective and practical solutions for our clients.

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Our Services

01	Integrated Leadership Discovery
02	Creating a coaching ecosystem
03	Leadership capability building
04	Building healthy high performing teams
05	Culture, Values & Purpose
06	Organizational capability transformation

Podcast Guests

Natal Dank
Author and Co-founder,
PXO Culture

Prof. Vishal Gupta
Author and
Professor, IIM Ahmedabad

P. Dwarkanath
Former Chairman, GSK
Consumer Healthcare Ltd

N. K. Chaudhary
CMD, Jaipur Rugs

Robbie Stamp
CEO, BIOSS International

Yogesh Sirohi
Partner & CFO, PwC India

Amit Kaul
India Country Manager,
Dialpad

Amit Dubey
Board Director, Airbnb
(Global Capability Center)

Jitender Panihar
CHRO, Fitelo

Aviad Goz
Author and Chairman,
N.E.W.S. Navigation

Rajkamal Vempati
President Human Resources,
*Axis Bank*

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Background

There are a few disciplines that catch the imagination of a wide variety of audiences; leadership, team, and culture fall in this category. What makes these subjects interesting and yet elusive is a strong component of art that shrouds them in some kind of mystery. The enormity of literature already available on these subjects gives us an idea about the popularity and the value associated with them, and yet every year we have new books and other means of information being created to satiate our need to learn more about leadership, teams, and culture.

The truism that experience is the best teacher fits aptly when we deal with subjects where there are no exact rules which if followed give specific results. Often in such cases, the wisdom of people who have walked the path, attempted to create something, and in the process have reflected on their experiences, is a wonderful way to learn. Our reason to start the **Straight from the Heart** podcast series, where we invite business leaders, consultants, academicians, and authors from across the globe, is one such attempt to capture and share life experiences linked to the above-mentioned three disciplines.

This document is a distilled essence of all that we heard from the eleven guests that we invited as Part 1 of our **Straight from the Heart - Conversations** series. We tried to cover the three disciplines through five lenses **Context, Board, Technology, Scale & Self.**

Context	Board	Technology	Scale	Self

Leadership | Team | Culture

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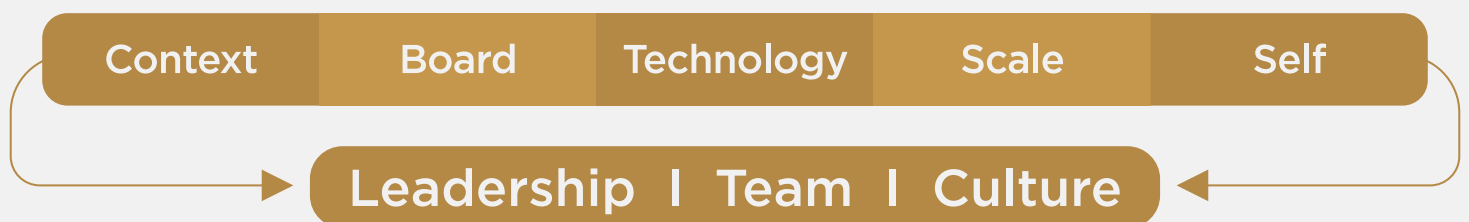
Key question:

How do I navigate my team/organization in an unfamiliar, dynamically evolving context?

The ability to navigate self & teams and leverage/challenge the existing culture gets tested when one leads in an unfamiliar and unpredictable context. This happened during and after the pandemic. The skill of navigation which requires constantly scanning the external environment and then galvanizing the organization/teams for short sprints while keeping the morale high and not losing sight of the broader direction, requires tremendous resilience, adaptability, and well-placed confidence.
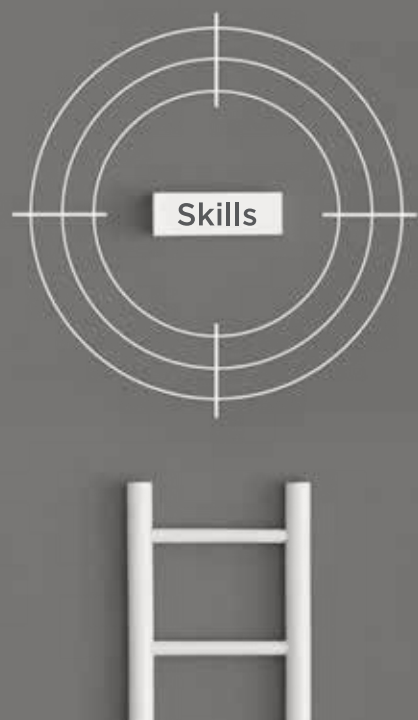
Key takeaway

Leaders need to learn how to balance the polarities of listening deeply and widely as well as acting quickly, while constantly reassessing and modelling both strategies and tactics. This is not something that they can learn in 'business as usual' kind of scenarios.

"One of the biggest challenges that leaders face in a crisis is linked to the ability of responding fast to a lot of quick changes at a collective level; responding fast and keeping everyone together doesn't come easily to a lot of leaders."

Aviad Goz- Author and Chairman, N.E.W.S. Navigation

While some aspects of leadership are perennial, with the changing socio-economic context and technological advancements along with being recently hit by a lethal pandemic, humanity in general started to introspect and connect at a deeper as well as wider level. This resulted in certain aspects becoming extremely crucial for leaders. The fluidity of time and space in a virtual work environment demands leaders to be truly empathic. Experiencing the impermanence of life at close quarters makes people question the real purpose of life and therefore they want to derive meaning from what they are doing at the workplace. This is now not being relegated to hobbies or retirement plans.

Key takeaway

Leaders of today need to develop awareness, appreciation, and abilities to manage and leverage the interesting potpourri linked to a dynamic and evolving context and continue to uphold some of the fundamentals of leadership like demanding high performance and creating a culture of empowerment.

Learning and constantly upgrading oneself is no more a choice, it is a necessity for leaders to survive and excel.

The technologically interconnected world also leads to the democratization of information which transmits and embeds the ideas/values of equity, transparency, and autonomy at a very early-life stage.

We also witness at times a skew towards sharing business practices, implementing processes/policies, and just paying lip service to sharing and embedding organizational values. The result is a loosely connected workforce with a strong awareness of rights, but a superficial feel of the invisible glue that binds the organization together.

"The enjoyment part existed before the pandemic, but the way you have to think about enjoyment, empathy and equity will become even more important and maybe also difficult to show in a post-pandemic world, because how do you create coordination when people are dispersed? How will we create enjoyable workplaces?"

Vishal Gupta- Author and Professor, IIM Ahmedabad

? **Key question:**

What is the role of the board in shaping the 'smell of a place*'?

One of the most powerful competitive advantages that can be made transparent and yet it is almost impossible to copy is organizational culture. The ability to design, infuse and sustain a distinct organizational culture is a complex code and highly successful organizations have learnt how to crack it.

Key takeaway

The board of an organization plays a critical role in setting the overarching theme which then needs to be enabled through various mechanisms, strategies, and practices by the CEO and the management team.

The larger organizational vision results in some guiding principles that the board leverages to define a broader cultural theme(s). This amorphous or abstract notion then needs to be systematized, institutionalized, and preserved by the CEO and his/her team.

"The board alone per se should not create a culture; it cannot drive it. It can create a strategy, broad cultural tenets but this has to be driven by the CEO and the leadership team, down the line, therefore it has to be co-evolved."

P. Dwarkanath- Former Chairman, GSK Consumer Healthcare Ltd

*Phrase used by late Professor Sumantra Ghoshal

Key takeaway

The board enables the organization to arrive at balanced decisions while keeping the vision and culture in mind, especially while dealing with apparent contradictions like bringing in operational efficiencies and demonstrating empathy and people centricity or introducing a partially tested groundbreaking, evolving technology and its possible ethical and reputational implications.

This assumes greater significance in today's business world where the tenure of CEOs and CXOs has relatively become short.

Key takeaway

A diverse and well-balanced board therefore sets and keeps an eye on the 'smell of the place.'

In a large, multi-business organization, there is a possibility of subculture formation e.g., a Pharma or IT culture. However, the fundamental norms to operate within the playing field are enshrined in the broader organizational culture that pervades across business groups and functions. A good example of this can be Amazon's leadership principles that are followed by all Amazon entities.

Key takeaway

Multi-business organizations, therefore, need a codification, cascade, and reinforcement of the cultural tenets that can be leveraged by all business entities.

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Key question:

As a CEO or a board member what do I need to know to effectively govern AI and emerging technologies?

The advancement and application of technologies especially in the last few years has taken the business world by storm. It seems as if disruption and technology are synonymous. In the last 12-14 months, Artificial Intelligence (AI) with its open-source avatar has been one of the biggest leaps in the technology marathon. While it is opening new possibilities with a promise to make our lives easier and simpler, it also raises a few ethical questions around its implementation and its consequences in certain areas.

Addressing complex technology like an AI system as just a tool, is an oversimplification that creates an air of mystery. In order to demystify this, a good question to ask the leadership and the board is 'What is the work an AI system is doing?' Is it analysing and suggesting products as per customer preferences or is it executing multi-billion trade on its own over a period?

Key takeaway

From a governance standpoint has the AI system taken a form of agency and what is the level of authority it has started to exercise, assumes significance for a CEO or a Board.

"For the boards or the CEOs, it is important to answer the five A's linked to AI or advanced technologies."

What is the nature of **advice** AI offers?	What kind of explicit or implicit **authority** does AI take on?	What decisions are being **abdicated** because of AI?	What form of **agency** is taken by the AI system?	What levels of **accountability** are handed over to an AI system?

Robbie Stamp- CEO, BIOSS International

The Boards along with the CEOs and the executive teams will have to deal with, and at times pre-empt issues/scenarios in an interconnected, evolving, and impermanent context.

The geopolitical situation, technological advancements, and emergence of new/ changing social order etc. will require thinking and meaning-making which are not just confined to one field or discipline and therefore to merely behave as a specialist and create deep and lasting value at a board level, may not be viable.

Some parts of work may be taken fully or partially by AI like going through a checklist in areas like compliance. At the same time technologies and disciplines like data science, AI, gamification etc. can combine and make the work of CEOs, Executive teams, and Boards a lot more interactive and imaginative laced with visualization of possible scenarios, perhaps in a simulated world.

Key takeaway

To cut through the maze and finally arrive at a judgment, it will require meaning-making by decoding the interplay of multiple variables which may at times present a somewhat opposing phenomenon.

One such example is organizations being worried and sensitive in dealing with great resignation especially in some specific industries during and after Covid; then within months waves of layoffs, at times announced in a blunt manner resulting in employee backlash, mostly within the same industries.

An AI-guided (data-backed) human judgment, based on multiple scenarios generated by AI, considering various possibilities, can increase the quality of decision-making both from long-term and short-term perspectives.

Key question:

How do we make HR agile enough to complement business and technological agility?

Agility is one of the qualities that gets highlighted quite often while dealing with an emerging disruptive business reality. While we hear a lot of systems and processes becoming agile, the fundamental building block that is Human Resources still seems to follow methods and approaches that are not geared up for the current context. In order to make HR as a function more agile, it requires us to borrow ideas/concepts from business agility and then customize them for HR.

An example of this can be leveraging the idea of designing powerful end-to-end customer journeys to create an integrated employee experience. This requires a multifunctional, silo-busting approach that keeps the employee at the center and then designs HR processes and policies while incorporating technology, tools, and conversations.

The big shift is the departure from designing HR solutions in a top-down expertise-driven manner which must be near perfect or cast in stone and therefore inherits a certain order of rigidity.

The ability to bring abstraction down to the level where it can be converted into concrete, well-defined problems, enabling employees to establish a link with their problems/challenges/deliverables (e.g., building skills of collaboration to get the best out of a POD team structure because such teams have to constantly balance alignment and autonomy) makes the solution acceptable and agile.

Key takeaway

The big shift in designing HR solutions also eradicates/diminishes the arrogance of experience and expertise which plagues the design and implementation of effective people solutions, in the garb of doing things quickly.

"Things like well-being, engagement, and finding talent in a competitive marketplace are big problems. You cannot do it all at once. You have to break it down. You have to find out what is going on, and then you have to go and find the pain points and smaller problems to solve and start to prioritize and prototype a test at that level."

Natal Dank- Author and Co-founder, PXO Culture

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Key question:

What does it take to initiate sustainable change in large systems and startups?

Initiating sustainable change in any system means dealing with the mindset and skillset of professionals. While there are similarities, however, few things play out differently or in different magnitude in big organizations that have a history to lean onto versus startups that are bubbling with optimism to create history. In large, mature systems it is quite possible that leaders are thinking long-term and therefore taking bets and executing in a disciplined manner in areas that are important but perhaps not urgent. A certain degree of stability in terms of revenue, bottom line, clients etc. allows leaders in large systems to initiate change keeping in mind a larger time horizon and dedicate a certain number of professionals/teams who can devote a large chunk of their time in initiating and stabilizing the change that is envisaged.

The bigger part of the challenge is to keep a large/diversified workforce aligned and engaged with the change process which may take several months or years.

Key takeaway

The leadership maturity required to initiate, align, and sustain change as well as navigate the socio-political arena (e.g., engaging & managing stakeholders) within the system, becomes critical.

Managing multiple threads that are running concurrently in a big transformation program while causing no/minimal disruption to existing customer/client work

Ability to nudge/hustle or influence various stakeholders to contribute what is required from their end

Intelligently leverage or challenge existing culture to execute the transformation agenda

To do all of this requires tenacity and wisdom.

"Greater degree of involvement from the people at the front line helps to expand the ownership of the transformation goals from the senior leadership to the junior most person involved in that journey."

Yogesh Sirohi – Partner & CFO, PwC India

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Key question:

How do we deal with externally induced change/crisis in large systems where there is no precedence to rely on?

The way we deal with change that is initiated by the organization or is externally induced and has some precedence like a natural calamity in a specific area versus something that hits you out of the blue, there is no precedence to rely on, the magnitude and scale of impact is immense and to make matters worse there is no definite answer as to when we will exit from such a situation. What can leaders do to deal with such a situation?

Such situations provide us with the field to truly test the level of trust and humility that leaders have. Leaders do not have the answers, situations are evolving at a rapid pace and decisions need to be taken and implemented quickly at the ground level.

Key takeaway

The central command nerve center approach that is used in times of crisis may not always work in such situations. Balancing it quickly by creating support structures that enable the flow of information and decision-making is essential.

"In any crisis, lean on each other both horizontally and vertically. If you do not know the answers, have cross-function people and once you assign them, do not double guess."

Rajkamal Vempati- President Human Resources, Axis Bank

While established big organizations operate in a particular manner, startups have their unique set of challenges as most of them are building the plane while it is already up in the air and quite often face turbulence. Change process in startups is often by default and most of the employees including founders are fighting multiple battles.

A minor blip in the external environment can derail the plans that get created. While the need is to balance the long-term with the short-term, quite often it is the short-term that occupies a large portion of the mental space of the leaders as it is associated with survival.

With all the action expected in the startup world, there are a few things that ensure long-term success and become a fundamental reference point or anchor while initiating any kind of change. Two areas that should be considered are brand and culture. These need to be shared with prospective employees and customers. This gives a certain degree of stable character and a sense of permanence to the organization.

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Key question:

How can we communicate a startup's brand and culture in a fiercely competitive market?

In the initial phase of the startup, every leader/founder must assiduously play the role of an exceptional Talent Acquisition professional. The brand and the desired culture along with the meatiness and potential of the role and organization need to be crafted and communicated in an honest, articulate, and cogent manner. The complete recruitment ecosystem must be seen as one of the most critical value creation mechanisms and whether one hires or not, the experience provided creates the story of the brand and culture in the market.
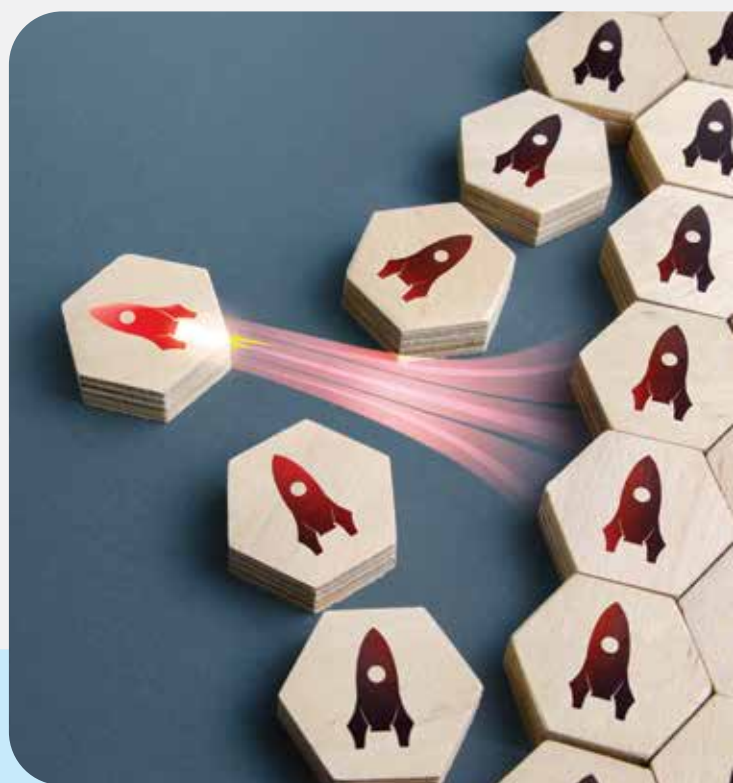
Key takeaway

The core message needs to be well scripted; it should encapsulate the identity of the organization and the promise it wants to make to its employees and customers. There must be consistency in the message that gets delivered through various platforms especially social media and through all the leaders as well as recruitment partners who are involved in the process.

If the organization is a part of a bigger mother ship (or is backed by trusted/renowned investor groups) operating in another geography and has a reputation or a positive recall, it can be leveraged to instill confidence.

> *"If the entire interview panel is not in sync in terms of what we want to do here in India, why we are here, the candidate will not be in sync and not get really excited about the role and the organization."*

Amit Kaul- India Country Manager, Dialpad

? **Key question:**

What role can HR play in startups to enable the organization and employees to deal with continuous change?

The dynamic nature of a startup, at times being led by a young, bright, and enthusiastic set of founders, usually goes through a lot of meandering before it eventually finds its relatively stable place in the overall order of things.

Apart from the business idea and the impact it can create in the future, the possibility of delivering results is largely dependent on the workforce that is ready to travel the journey with the founders/business heads.

The chaos and turbulence that employees must deal with like shortening of delivery deadlines demanded by the customer, change in business plans, unable to get the support of investors for the next funding round resulting in some layoffs, etc., needs to be managed effectively else it can easily tarnish the image of the startup and its propensity to hire good talent.

Key takeaway

HR leaders and teams in partnership with the business leaders can play a significant role like helping employees to deal with and find meaning in evolving/challenging or frequently changing goals; this is akin to the role of a sports coach.
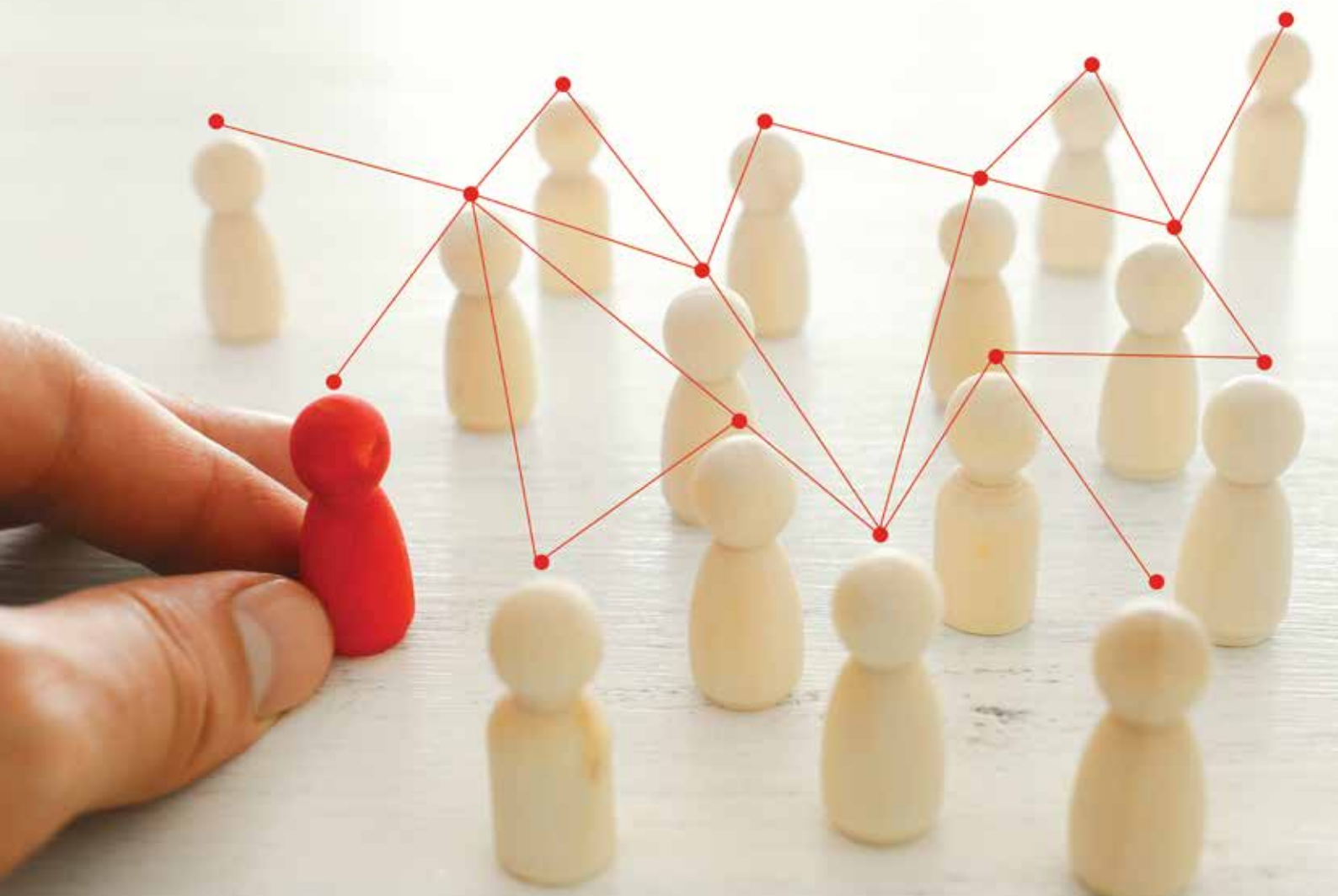
Key takeaway

Since startups deal with a lot of uncertainty, it is equally important to develop and nurture a strong problem-solving mindset irrespective of the areas for which one is hired or working. This can be equated with the role of a consultant. Sensing and balancing the needs of different parties like founders, leaders, employees, etc., especially in areas where there seem to be apparent contradictions. In some sense, HR acts like a conscience keeper.

For HR professionals, to play all these three roles effectively with ease and maturity requires a lot of competence, courage, and resilience.

"The role of HR leader and team in a startup is largely governed by the context. The context could be, let us say, a high growth phase, the context can be scale, size, the context can be, let us say, hyper-competitiveness. So, it totally depends in terms of what is the context of a particular startup. However, few roles like that of a coach, consultant and conscience keeper remain integral irrespective of the context of a startup."

Jitender Panihar- CHRO, Fitelo

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Key question:

What is the role of significant life events and their interpretations in shaping the leadership character?

Personal experiences and life journeys play a major role in shaping beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions which in turn define the leadership character of individuals who lead businesses or teams. It is often the confluence of adversity and encounters with people and places of remarkable significance that leave a long-lasting impact on individuals who occupy leadership positions.

In the earliest chapters of our lives, our first heroes emerge in the form of our parents or primary caregivers. They become the architects of our principles, imparting wisdom that bestows meaning and stability upon our paths. However, this formative influence can also cast shadows, as they sometimes sow seeds of fear, doubt, discrimination, or diffidence by imposing anachronistic and/or redundant beliefs and experiences.

Key takeaway

At the core of leadership lies the profound ability to discern and embrace what aligns with righteousness and harmony in the present moment, while fearlessly challenging and relinquishing all that appears unjust, incongruent, or unsuitable according to one's discernment.

This pivotal ability demands clarity of thought, unwavering courage, and a deep connection with our inner voice—the very force that propels us forward even in the face of daunting odds.

"When I started this business with two looms at my home with nine weavers, the first challenge that I faced was from my own family members. My family members said they (weavers) are untouchables; we will not let them inside our home. Neighbours said that they will not let them in the neighbourhood. Then when I used to go to functions, or parties or gatherings, initially people used to deny handshake saying that you work with the untouchables. However, I had the conviction and belief to move forward."

N.K. Chaudhary – CMD, Jaipur Rugs

Personal journeys of creators are fraught with taking unusual calls that do not fit into the common sense that prevails, it can be taking a bet on people who are considered underdogs by the society to create a great enterprise or being intuitive to understand that some of the most successful methods or people may not fit into the collective energy of what one is determined to create.

"During my cancer survivor journey, I insisted that I only want to meet survivors because that gave me hope and that is something that now I'm extremely passionate about, that I try and build communities of survivors who can speak with people who are going through similar journeys."

Amit Dubey- Board Director, Airbnb (Global Capability Center)

Key takeaway

The idea of leaving a legacy and impacting a larger section of the society/organization in some way characterises the drive to go beyond self while working within the boundaries of the role that one is playing out.

The language of such leaders is laced with optimism, appreciation, gratitude, harmony and service with energy and drive to create an impact for the greater good. The nurturing of such universal values at times gets shaped due to extremely testing life events where one is in a situation to lose what one values the most. Quite often one must travel through the 'Hero's Journey*' to lead organizations and teams with clarity, conviction, and courage.

Key takeaway

Authentic leaders view their organizations/teams as a field where they express their personal values and therefore, they give a lot of importance to the culture of the organization because the congruence of personal and organizational values allows them to live a life of integrity.

*Hero's Journey by Joseph Campbell

Vivek Tiwari
*Founder,
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A Human Capital Consultant working with Pragyan Advisory, has multi-disciplinary exposure in the domains of Human Resources, Business Development, Marketing Analytics with a demonstrated history of working in the information technology, advertising industry and Government of India projects.

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