

THE PAST THE PRESENT & THE FUTURE OF WORK

‘Not a prediction,
but a vision for the future’

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people
matters



Nothing in life is to be feared,
it is only to be understood.
Now is the time to understand
more, so that we may fear less.”

— Marie Curie

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Author's Profile

Author's Note

I was asked to write an article on the 'future of work' by someone who clearly thought I had a lot of wisdom to offer. On the other hand, I was not sure how anyone can predict the future of anything. For example, who could have predicted COVID-19!

I had also not written for a while but once the inertia of putting pen to paper or rather 'fingers to keyboard' disappeared, I started typing & could not stop. I realized I had so much to say!

Going by the number of pages I managed to type out, I am either a pompous fool or an experienced, introspective and observant Gen Xer with an informed world view and a vision for the future. I am sure you are hoping it is the latter.

I can only tell you this is not a paid assignment. I have written it from the heart and of course the mind. The latter is necessary to make any relevant points and the former is the reason why some of the points may seem too passionate.

If you take the time to read further, I hope my 'words of wisdom' will resonate with your inner voice. If you have been ignoring your inner voice, as many of us often do, I hope my thoughts will make you pause and ponder on how 'you' will play to win in the future: Not just for yourself, but for your organization, your family and your community.

You may wonder - what does family and community have to do with the future of work? That's 'personal'! But my myriad

thoughts could not ignore the personal impact on our lives caused by COVID-19 because,

what could be more personal than giving up the right to breathe freely?

Several lessons emerge from the deep personal impact caused by this rare, global pandemic. While the learnings may play out differently in our personal and professional environment, they share common themes. I have captured those themes to arrive at '**not a prediction but a vision for the future of work**', taking a holistic view of our personal and professional responsibilities. I believe the two will be even more deeply intertwined in the future.

A vision without details is a dream, not a plan!

Each chapter can be further detailed but could become a book in itself. So I have provided directional recommendations for the future workplace intended for business leaders, HR leaders. They are most importantly, all curious minds that have the courage to be potential change agents for the future.

Whether you agree or disagree, I would love to hear from you!

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Happy Reading! ***

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Overview of the Chapters



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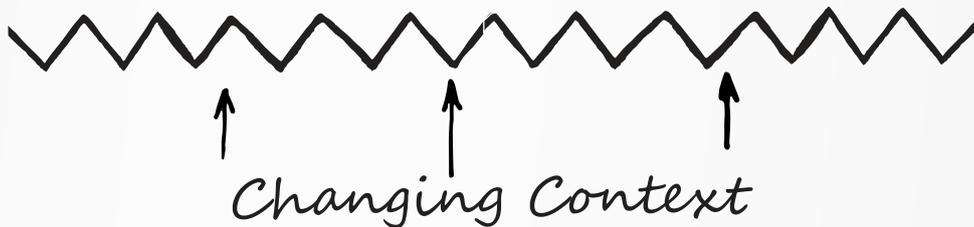
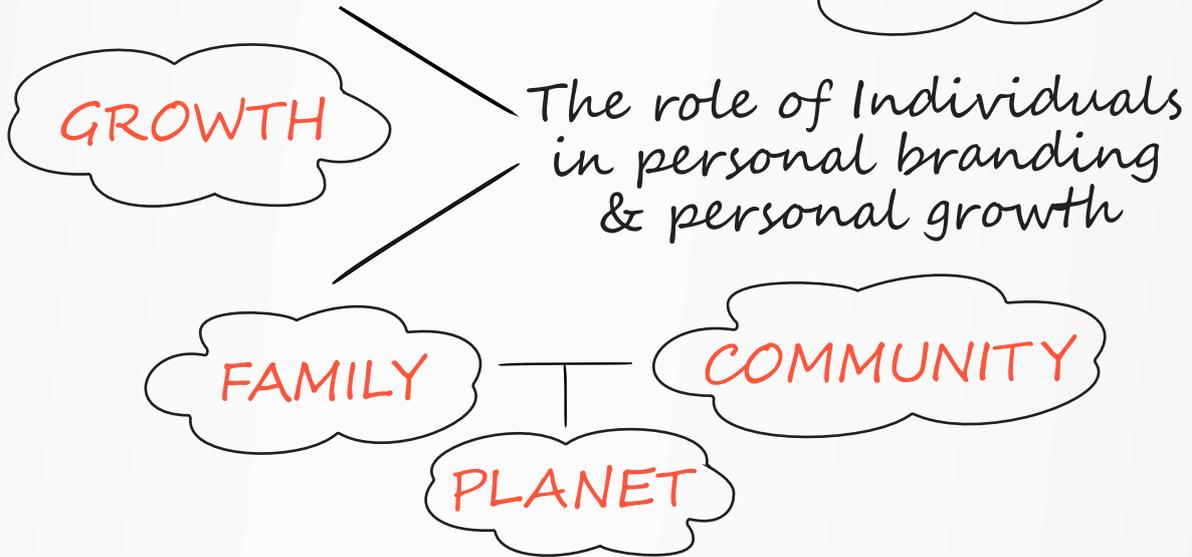
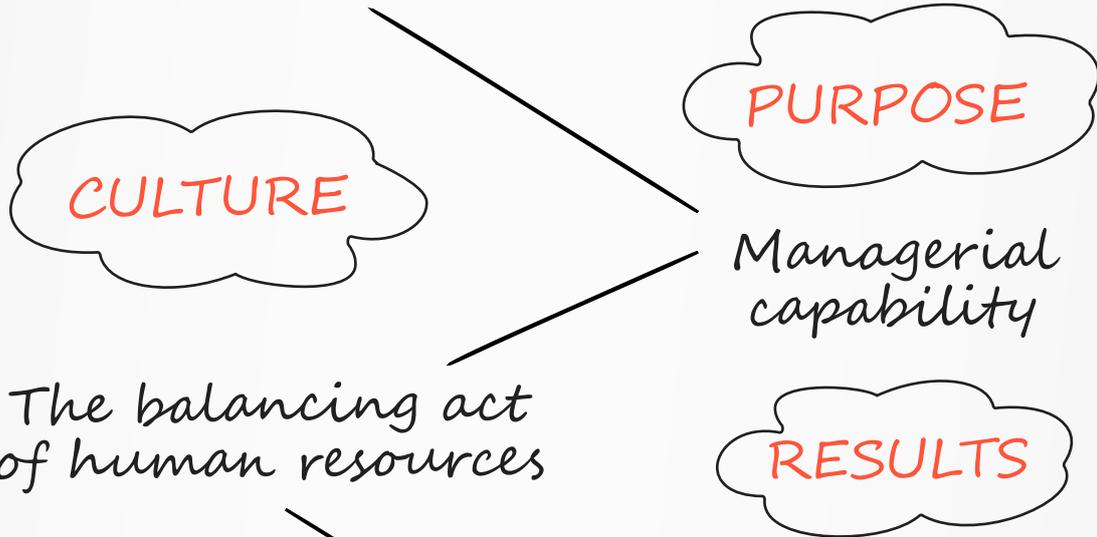
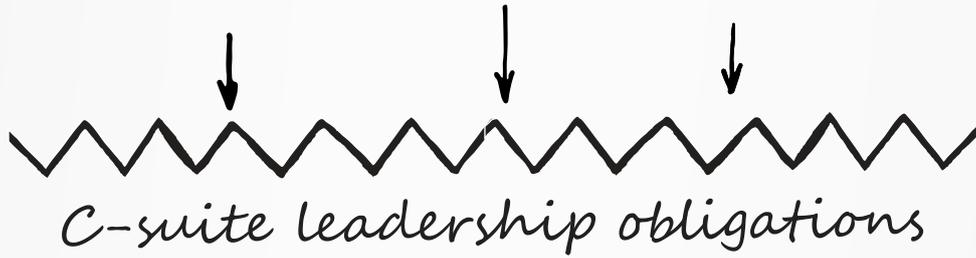


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Personal growth



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Bringing it all together

External Environment



The Future-Playing to Win!

Foresight and Hindsight



I am not a 'pundit', astrologer, or economist!

I cannot make a 'prediction' on **what will happen** to the future of work. But,

- As a Gen Xer with over two decades of experience leading human resources functions for Fortune 500 organizations
- As a global citizen who has experienced a diversity of corporate and country cultures across the world and, last but not least
- As typically, one of the few women in the C-suite

I have a vision of **what should happen** to workplaces in the future. I believe:

If we can visualize it, we can shape it!

I also believe in the power of human potential for learning which gives me hope that we will shape the future and be leaders not victims of change.

Although COVID-19 took away our basic right to breathe freely and exposed our vulnerability as a human race, it also exposed our resilience and ability to introspect and adapt.

Enough has been said about the negative impact of COVID-19 – the loss to families, businesses, communities or countries – that cannot be understated. **I have chosen to focus on the opportunities before us.**



There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune...”

– William Shakespeare (in Julius Caesar)

This was the bard’s way of acquainting us with the Greek rhetoric concept of “kairos” or the ideal time. **We all dream of making changes to the status quo but tend to wait for the opportune moment.** However, some experiences push you towards that change; as with the rising tide in the ocean, it is up to us to use the momentum to push ourselves forward, to set sail.

As the global pandemic took hold,

physical masks came on & psychological masks came off.

The need to look good with expensive cosmetics or hair & skin treatments was replaced by the need to freely breathe fresh air.

Once the initial shock wore off, faced with a new grim reality we began to adapt:

Within the first few months of 2020, new behaviors emerged in our personal and professional lives that soon became the norm.

One day I am sure we will throw away our masks and breathe freely again but,

what about our new behaviors? will we throw them away too?

In the choices we make now, lies our destiny – as individuals, organizations and communities even countries.

Hindsight

Hindsight is 2020 !

Hindsight is meant to make us wiser for the future.

What a wicked twist of fate that 2020 is the year offering plenty of hindsight. The lessons I share are not new and for the most part, you will already know them. Many of those are common sense and stare us in the face as we go about our duties managing organizations and/ or homes. For some reason, perhaps the busyness of work or life, we ignore those and move on. COVID-19 smacked us in the faces, almost literally, with these lessons in a manner so stark and so dark, that we cannot ignore them and wisdom tells us that we must not.

Minimalism

Stay true to basics,
do more with less.



National lockdowns imposed to contain the virus, forced us to live within limitations & we learned to conserve resources in the face of uncertainty.

MATERIALISM took a back seat to MINIMALISM, COMPLEXITY to SIMPLICITY!

At home, we optimized on groceries and other “essentials”. Similarly, organizations and even countries focused on “essential services” to ‘keep the lights on’.

Despite operating with limited resources many organizations were able to protect ‘essential’ communication and business with customers & employees.

COVID-19 forced us to simplify, to stay lean, and do more with less. However, hasn't it always been important to stay grounded & **from time to time ask basic existential questions**

What is our purpose & what resources do we need to fulfill it?

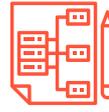
Do we really need all that we have? Or should we take stock of ‘excesses’ and consciously rid our personal lives and our organizations of the complex, the ‘non-essentials’?

Greater the complexity, the lesser is our agility. Yet, organizations are so slow in getting rid of unnecessarily complex structures and processes that only increase the gap between customers/ employees and the CEO.

Lessons Learnt:



- Leaders must make a commitment to keep the organization agile and nimble all the time. This requires a sharp focus on organization purpose/ goals and a 'fit for purpose' flat organization design.



- Leaders must refrain from adding excess to organization structures to satisfy individual needs i.e. their own or that of any employee and act only in the best interest of the organization they serve.



- Leaders must question the long-term value of every decision on organization structure, talent and workforce plans. *(Good talent management processes facilitate these decisions)*



- Finally, leaders must spend a disproportionate amount of time on areas most critical/ "essential" to business instead of spreading themselves thin. *(Great teams enable this)*

By 'staying true to basics' & reviewing 'organization health' from time to time, organizations can stay lean yet effective even during good times.



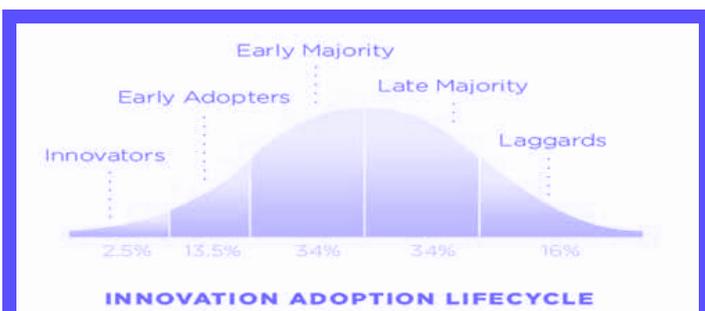
Technology 'Will' vs. 'Won't'

Where there is a will, there is a way...
...to adopt technology.



COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation & behavioral change.

Due to social distancing norms, **COVID-19 facilitated a rapid digital transformation that proved everyone can be an “early adopter”.** *



* Definition: The term early adopter refers to an individual or business who uses a new product, innovation, or technology before others.

There are several examples of this

The inability to interact in person resulted in schools transitioning to an online daily routine. Utterly chaotic and amusing in the beginning, it quickly settled with new rules of engagement between teachers, students and parents.

With gyms and restaurants shut, online classes for fitness, cooking, etc. became popular. And last but not the least, as the fear of COVID-19 brought everyone closer together, online communication increased with extended family members.

HIGH TECH. enabled HIGH TOUCH in a COVID-19 world.

In grass-root businesses, small farm owners & local kiranas improvised to sell their produce directly to consumers. Online ordering systems, no contact deliveries and digital payments got established at scale. As large eCommerce players struggled with regulations, market access and supply chains, the smaller players captured markets through agility & innovation. In this way, **COVID-19 democratized eCommerce.**

A positive technology experience facilitated the speed of transformation

This rapid technology adoption was facilitated by intuitive, user-friendly tools like Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Zoom, etc. which even children could operate.

Similarly, in India where cash transactions are still the norm, an inability to exchange cash, created a forced transition to digital payment apps. Even reluctant technology adopters found that Google pay, Paytm, PhonePe or net banking apps with their easy to use interfaces were a much better way to transact without fear.

In organizations, digital transformation has long been a buzzword. For years, visionary CEOs and CTO's attempted digital transformations but struggled with adoption & resistance to change. **Within days, workplaces were fully functional online.**

Given no other choice, we found the will to change.

Diligent HR teams followed up with new 'work from home' policies & benefits along with new rules of engagement between managers and employees.

The point to introspect is this:

Why has it been so hard to achieve speed of digital transformation in the past?

The issue is that the technology discussion is typically an afterthought in many organizations. Usually, it is a productivity measure to reduce headcount. Consultants are hired to analyze organization "fat" and a leader or two are assigned to drive change. The assigned leaders form cross-functional teams to further analyze the problem resulting in several reports and reviews over time. It is a slow and arduous process, by which time ironically more heads are added in the form of contract or full-time staff.

Managers get used to large teams and a tremendous inertia to change the status quo seeps into the entire organization.

Another issue is that several internal technology teams are not resourced well enough to provide cutting edge internal productivity tools. This leads to unhappy employees who use the tools only because management forces them to do so, while they continue manual processes in parallel. This creates even more inefficiency in the system and an organization's aversion to technology.

Lessons Learnt:

- It has now been proven beyond doubt that technology must be an integral part of the CEO's strategy & objectives from the beginning, not just for customers, but also for internal productivity & communication. Because, well it (technology) works!
- Every organization must aim to be a cutting-edge technology organization, irrespective of the nature of the business. There may be different translations of the technology strategy, but having one is critical.
- CIOs/ CTOs must create best in class digital tools that create a positive, intuitive and user-friendly technology experience for employees as well as for customers.
- Employees or consumers must find the will to change and play an active role in defining their technology experience or be prepared to be at the receiving end of the change.

The Culture glue

Shared values create a common 'compass' for decisions & actions which becomes 'culture' and builds a powerful cohesive unit.

A culture of SAVING, SELF-DEPENDENCE & A DEEPER SENSE OF FAMILY seems to have emerged strongly in many families.

Family members sharing the same space 24/7 led to further development of family cultures. For many families, especially working parents with no childcare support, it has been a stressful time. On the positive side, in many homes, children took on more responsibility around the house. They emulated their parents who took the stress in their stride and not only 'got on with it' but were also able to harness increased family time to strengthen their family culture.

By design or default, in several families, both parents stepped up to co-own chores of cooking, cleaning or engaging young children in meaningful ways while at the same time, working from home. This has led to a greater appreciation of what it takes to manage the home front. In such families, this could lead to a positive evolution of gender roles in the future.

As families shared meals and conversations at the dining table and indulged in activities together i.e. reading, cooking, baking, family movie nights, etc. they made the lockdowns memorable despite all the stresses and strains. While this may not be the case for all, humans are blessed with the ability to stay resilient & positive if they choose to do so.

I believe that,

young children growing up during this time of COVID-19 with a positive family experience will grow up as positive, self-assured, resilient individuals with a balanced view of gender roles and a greater sense of family values.

In organizations,

values guiding behavior & decision making at the workplace determine 'Organization Culture'

Values are reflected in:



The amazing and potentially dangerous aspect of culture is that,

Culture drives scalability!

Just like COVID-19 can spread through physical touch, culture can spread from one employee to another very quickly through an emotional and psychological 'touch' and enables employees all over the organization to have the same compass, same value system for decisions & actions wherever they are in the world.

Culture spreads amongst employees by observing **how leaders show up to work** & via various moments of truth that occur throughout the employee's lifecycle in the organization - From new hire assimilation to the exit experience.

I remember in one of my organizations, whenever I went for a meeting, however junior I was at that time, even the most senior leader who had invited me to the meeting would walk me to the door at the end of the meeting - It was courteous and respectful. It is a habit that I picked up from there and has stayed with me. So many people have commented to me or my assistant how touched they are, that I walked them to the door or the elevator personally. However, for me, it has become part of my values.

When all leaders behave in a similar way, our behavior becomes subconscious and becomes the culture of the organization that "infects" others who come into contact with us. Just like I was 'infected' two decades ago. The above example shows that culture can be acquired.

During COVID-19, organizations that invested in a culture of accountability, trust and empowerment created self-driven employees who delivered results even from home. In such cultures, the physical location of employees is completely irrelevant as the focus is entirely on results achieved via clarity of goals combined with openness, transparency and trust.

However micromanagement cultures suffered as those are largely task-oriented as employees complete assignments under physical supervision without a great deal of clarity on the bigger picture.

People centric culture focused on results and on figuring out **what** needed to be done. *****Helicopter** or micro management cultures focused on **how** to get work done and indulged in unproductive productivity analysis.

(**a management style of hovering over employees like a helicopter to get work done)

COVID-19 proved that a command and control culture has limited if any value.

People-centric cultures are a far more efficient way for organizations to achieve results.

When employees feel empowered, they usually become self-motivated and go above and beyond their job descriptions to meet the company's goals. Organizations are able to harness their full potential*** and the job of management is to focus on the 'big rocks',**** provide inspiring leadership and clear direction to happy employees who "own" results. **Typically, such organizations are able to implement flatter organization designs where employees deliver great performance while living the organization's values.**

****Potential generally refers to a currently unrealized ability. The term is used in a wide variety of fields, from physics to the social sciences to indicate things that are in a state where they are able to change in ways ranging from the simple release of energy by objects to the realization of abilities in people. (Reference: Wikipedia)*

*****Strategic focus areas, big: Ideas.*

What is people centricity?

Sadly, people centricity is a very misunderstood concept.

Here are two examples of what is inaccurately perceived as being 'people centric'.



- **Not letting go of weak performers. It harbors mediocrity.**

It creates an environment that frustrates good performers who eventually attrite. It is unfair to the poor performers who may be better suited for other jobs in the long run but will likely be let go in a tough economy over time, when it is harder for them to find employment.



- **Promoting employees to large jobs without careful consideration of their capability performance & values. It adds unnecessary fat at the top & dilutes the core principles of effective organization design.**

It impacts meritocracy & culture as Employees take cues about what kind of performance, behaviour the organization values, by observing which employees are getting rewarded, promoted etc. When an organization makes a wrong 'call' on a promotion others similarly situated employees start demanding to be promoted as well. Faced with poor justification for why the organization made that wrong call it is forced to promote more undeserving employees and it lowers the bar for the whole organization in the long run.

In my opinion,

A people-centric culture is one where,
the organization has a CLEAR & INSPIRING PURPOSE,
a COMPELLING VISION of the future, and
an environment of TRUST, TRANSPARENCY & EMPOWERMENT.

Leaders set ambitious goals and
give employees the 'psychological safety' they need to take risks,
collaborate and innovate.

Employees feel a SENSE OF OWNERSHIP for the organization,
resulting in
an ENTREPRENEURIAL & AGILE culture.

A people centric culture sets a HIGH BAR
for talent. It invests in hiring the right talent
for the right jobs & also invests significantly
in talent development

**Such cultures have a
very sharp focus on
results,
but they will never
compromise their values
to achieve them.**

Lessons Learnt:

- Leaders must make significant investments right at the beginning in establishing the organizational culture and stay true to their values in day to day decision making.
- Even without articulation, culture can be seen & felt. Organizational actions not aligned to values create culture compromises that sometimes can never be retracted until there is a change of leader. In one of my organizations, we used to call it the 'Say:Do' ratio or how much do you practice what you preach.
- Culture has a tremendous impact on people's emotional state at work which translates into results. HR leaders must hold business leaders accountable for role modeling culture and values as much as for delivering results.

The case for an inclusive culture

'Put yourself in their shoes' is not just a catchy phrase anymore.

Since everyone was in the same boat, COVID-19 brought out the humane in all of us.

In communities, we supported senior citizens and those impacted by the virus, providing groceries at the doorstep; we protected wages of those who worked in our homes and communities. We understood their pain because we were experiencing similar anxieties. We experienced 'empathy'.

We were all in it together!

I recall playing blind folded cricket during an Inclusion & Diversity (I&D) event at one of my past organizations. The objective was to experience the world of blind cricketers by putting ourselves in their shoes.

As everyone worked from home,

COVID -19 put every manager in the shoes of every employee.

Often, despite personal crises at home usually concerning a child, working parents especially mothers felt they had to be physically present at the office for a meeting lest they lose out on growth opportunities or appear less committed than their peers. We now know beyond doubt that it is possible to get work done from home. While in-person meetings will always have great value the question to ask is:

Should in-person meetings always be the default option to interact with someone meaningfully when the same job can get done through a remote interaction?

A meeting is a meeting if managed with good agenda and content. A virtual meeting should not be colored by our own biases of how we prefer to operate. Empathy is about understanding that sometimes a 2-hour trek to the office for a 15-min meeting is not sensible when work can be managed remotely. This is a gender agnostic matter but practically it is generally more relevant for working mothers, who all things being equal would always prefer in person meetings.

As 'work from home' blurred the lines between 'work' and 'home' in many ways, I believe we should consciously integrate the two much more effectively in the future.

This also opens organizations for a whole new set of talent – one that is capable and qualified but for various reasons, needs to work remotely.

The truth is that successful global organizations figured this out years ago and changed their modus operandi to ensure people attending meetings remotely on calls (in pre-Zoom and MS Teams days), were heard as much as people physically present in the meeting.

They enabled successful remote working through a conscious culture change.

At the same time, WFH optimized facilities and infrastructure costs. Those visionary organizations nurtured talent irrespective of where they operated from. This allowed them access to the best talent across the globe, resulting in a truly inclusive, diverse organizational culture.

COVID-19 labelled the playing field and has done a great service to the cause of I&D, better than any classroom training or leader speech could have ever done.

Leveling the playing field' in the context of diversity is another highly misunderstood concept. It may as well be replaced with terms like 'favoritism', 'encouraging mediocrity' and so forth.

Diversity is not about being patronizing

Because talented individuals are especially proud and hate being patronized. As an example, many women work harder and longer than they need to, just to avoid being labeled as “the diversity candidate who got the promotion. Such callous remarks push an organization many steps backward because they question the integrity not just of the candidate who may be most qualified for the promotion but, they also question the integrity of the decision-making body i.e. management.

Diversity is not about allowing mediocre leg up. Diversity is about creating space for a variety of talent to co-exist.

Imagine being at a dinner table at a friend's house (pre social distancing if I may add). A new person walks in, we all *move over* just a bit. We ask others to *shift a little* and make space for the new person. We do not ask the new person to first prove to us that they deserve to be at the table. We do not judge them at face value. We just assume they deserve to be there as much as us because they have also been invited to the same party as us. It is the same in organizations.

- **Inclusion** is about allowing everyone irrespective of their background, *a seat at the table* like someone allowed us to sit there.
- **Diversity** is about *inviting people to the party who are different from us and, not shutting them out because they are different.*

It really is that simple!

Let's forget about diversity for a second. It is another highly used buzzword in organizations.

What is innovation?

Innovation in its modern meaning is "a new idea, creative thoughts, new imaginations in the form of device or method".

Innovation is often also viewed as the application of better solutions that meet new requirements, unarticulated needs, or existing market needs.

(Ref. Wikipedia)

Simply put,
Innovation
is ideas turning
into reality.

A variety of ideas increases the chances of innovation, isn't it? And, common sense tells us that different life experiences lead to different or 'new' ways of thinking about the same problem. Therefore,

shouldn't allowing different ideas to co-exist and build upon each other nurture innovation?

If so, different life experiences, different thought processes and ideas are nothing but 'diversity' Diversity can be differences in gender, nationality, age, etc. i.e

Variety = Diversity.

Too many organizations perform a lip service to the cause of diversity without realizing its deeper connection to innovation. The reality is:

Truly innovative organizations are also diverse!

- **They accept not reject** – Whether it's different people or different ideas.
- **They include not Exclude**
- **They brainstorm not dismiss**

If innovation is important to an organization's success, diversity should also be important.

So why is diversity so hard to implement?

Because it is hard!

The pipelines of qualified diverse or minority talent are insufficient for various reasons, so one must look harder and try harder to build a diverse team. It takes effort.

Even Inside any organization, it takes more effort to pay attention to minority voices. It needs a '*listening ear*', but it's easier and faster to go with the 'majority' view. However, if building a diverse organization supports innovation and history has shown that organizations died because they could not innovate, then what's the rush?

Lessons Learnt:

In my opinion, fostering diversity is not about equal rights. That is a base level human expectation. **Fostering diversity is about building innovative businesses where ideas thrive irrespective of their origin.** Without innovation, the organization seeps into complacency and 'maintenance' mode – that is not the 'stuff' of great organizations. Leaders must connect achieving and sustaining diversity as an essential prerequisite to achieving sustainable innovation.

Achieving an OUTPUT of healthy diversity ratios requires tremendous strategic planning, leadership engagement and a focus on INPUT. e.g.

- **Assesing the quality of talent hiring processes.** From sourcing to the final interview, are they facilitating a healthy pipeline? If not, what are the choke points and what can we do about it, are questions to be answered.
- **Accessing sources of raw talent** and partnering with educational and skill development bodies, is another great way to increase pipelines.
- **Unlearning of 'fixed' manager mindsets and awareness of unconscious biases, that can erode inclusion.** The organization takes cues about what is important from observing where managers/leaders are spending time; which meetings they tend to cancel, reschedule etc. Therefore such unlearning must be led from the top by the CEO & his/her staff.
- **Fostering innovation** by listening to and encouraging all new ideas to flourish.
- **Paying attention to talent development and promotion conversations,** to remove any biases in decision making.
- **An inclusive culture is a prerequisite to sustaining diversity.** i.e. from "D&I" to "I&D". A non-inclusive or patronizing culture will cause diverse capable talent to attrite because they usually will not bend over backward to fit into a culture of 'group think' that discourages differences of opinion and expects them to become part of the 'clan'.

Attrition should be carefully analyzed as opposed to writing off individuals as a culture misfit or taking a view that "diversity doesn't work for us". Perhaps the definition of "us" needs evaluation as it may be toxic for the organization in the long term.

No greatness was ever achieved by taking the easy path. Organizations and leaders must take the hard path to build a truly inclusive, diverse organization.

They must nurture talent irrespective of where they come from, and "shift"/ adjust their modus operandi, if required, to allow different talent space to coexist with each other.

In an empowering culture that invests in people, great talent contributes ideas that build great businesses and create great workplaces.

Managers are made, not born!

An employee 'sees' the organization through his/her manager's actions.

The two most critical qualities of a manager are to:

- 1 • **drive goal, clarity and accountability that achieves results**
- &
- 2 • **build a values-driven team culture through coaching and empathy.**

In the COVID-19 crisis management situation, a managers' clarity and accountability for results was critical. At the same time, employees were adjusting to 'work from home' challenges as they shared space with noisy children and working spouses on their own video calls. Several had their own anxieties about the future. The situation caused by **COVID-19 created an opportunity for managers to bond with their team members in a very 'real' way.**

Empathy – a critical manager quality came to light. Empathetic managers to built greater emotional investment & secured discretionary effort & results from their team members.

Authenticity – confident, secure managers did not hesitate to share their own challenges and vulnerability with their team members, which made them more 'human'. This was,

after all, a life-altering event for all of us. Eventually, whether people kept their jobs or lost them, authentic empathetic managers helped ease the personal crises of employees. Whether or not this will be recognized in formal performance appraisals, it was the right thing to do. In life's appraisal of how one has impacted others' when they most needed support, such managers will surely be counted & remembered by people and their families.

Being a manager is a tremendous responsibility yet very low investment is made in this area.

As a result, in pre COVID-19 times, we have found managers assigning unclear goals or changing goals frequently or worse still, setting goals right before appraisals. This results in arbitrary performance measures which are unfair and demotivating to the performers. It also leads to a lack of transparency and office politics and the organization is unable to align the energies of all departments to achieve exceptional business and people results.

Add to this, unconscious biases (typically present in most human beings) left unaddressed in a manager's role, coupled with lack of empathy and authenticity, can lead to disengaged teams.

i. e. DISASTER!



Lessons Learnt:



- Organizations especially those on fast growth paths must calibrate whether they are building good managers/leaders. Right from the C-suite to the supervisor on the shop floor. 'Throwing' someone into a manager's job without providing the essential toolkit enabling him/her to manage the duality of a manager's role i.e. focus on results & focus on people, is being unfair on that individual and their team.



- The *teaching* of managers must start early - Irrespective of how much experience one has come with, the organization's new hire assimilation must inculcate in all new managers however senior in role, the values & culture of the organization they are about to represent. They must be provided the essential toolkit, and training to address managerial dilemmas in a way that aligns with the organization's culture.



- Organizations must hold 'good' leaders and managers accountable for creating more leaders & building critical managerial capability through coaching and mentoring in addition to classroom training.



- Managers themselves must recognize that employees observe them keenly and take cues from their behavior. They must be open to feedback and be aware of their blind spots. They must aspire to create an emotional engagement towards goals to drive discretionary effort and; they must spend time building the overall team culture and drive values along with results.

Managers must be authentic and have empathy along with accountability

Taking a company from good to great



If humans are one of the most complex beings on earth then, shouldn't the department that manages 'Human Resources', and deals with human intellect and emotions, therefore be, the most complex function that requires deep investment from the organization?

There were a few jokes floating around about HR driving "meaningless" engagement events during the COVID-19 crises. Just "typical HR" which some HR professionals found offensive and others with a sense of humor laughed off.

They don't teach event management in HR degree courses and it does not define HR. Business growth, talent growth, culture development and balancing business acumen with empathy does.

During COVID-19, HR functions came up with wellness initiatives that were extremely helpful for those who needed it. They helped people cope with crises and uncertainty and I believe that even if few people were prevented from falling into a clinically depressed state of mind, the ROI of such efforts, has been realized.

HR teams also helped manage people costs and tough people decisions with empathy. They relooked at the present and future of work for their organizations – be it integrating technology with workforce planning, reviewing organization design, key talent engagement or new policies for work from home.

Unfortunately, there is still rampant ignorance about the role of HR not just from outside the HR fraternity but sometimes even from within.

The HR function is like an iceberg – a significant part of it lies under the surface.

The scope of the HR role extends from working with decision-makers in the C suite to interns, enabling large, complex organizations to move forward in harmony. We motivate, influence and sometimes have to give courage to decision-makers and at other times also stand up to them. The role of HR is to facilitate leaders to be the face of people initiatives. When leaders set the right tone and role model culture, when they say and do the right things, the organization and people benefit.

For an HR professional, empathy/people centricity have to go hand-in-hand with business acumen which can sometimes be at cross purposes with each other.

I need not mention the immense transactional work that HR teams also do to keep the ship afloat: keeping people paid on time and engaged and keeping the organization compliant only gets noticed when something goes wrong.

Most organizations do not run a high-tech HR operation and HR teams typically do not get a technology share of mind or money. Yet effort involved in managing HR processes goes unrecognized and underappreciated for the most part.

Strangely, organizations invest heavily in customer data analytics, but investing in people analytics is always a slow process. This is despite the fact, that those very people are the ones tasked with customer satisfaction. Unlike for revenues or sales, it is difficult to put a numerical value on people insights, facilitation, coaching & other roles played by HR. Therefore,

The HR function spends way too much time having to prove that it is adding value.

Lessons Learnt:

- In the future, HR should spend significantly more time equipping themselves with critical skills to deal with the complexities of human behaviour instead of having to prove their worth. Skills such as, coaching, facilitation, change management, building manager capability, etc. will be even more critical in future.
- HR must role model organization culture and hold themselves and leaders accountable to a higher standard of values and performance. They should refrain from being used as a manager's crutch for all those actions the manager does not want to make time for or does not feel comfortable engaging in. There must be an agreed operating model between the managers and HR and the organization must be clear on how the two roles interact with each other.
- Employee engagement is primarily the responsibility of the manager supported by the organization's HR policies. Regarding employee events, they should be driven by an employee committee or internal communications or volunteer leaders under the guidance of HR. HR teams should not spend disproportionate time executing events on the ground as they have a larger role to play. This is already the case in most good organizations.
- HR professionals need to be fanatic about talent analytics and must demand their share of cutting edge technology investment. This has a significant impact on their own productivity and ability to support better decision making. Giving managers live access to intelligent talent analysis, is not only empowering and transparent but it also makes a powerful case for change. As the old saying goes, "In God we trust, everyone else brings data". HR teams must demand & provide data and invest in tools that help them do their job better.
- Finally, the best HR professionals have courage and conviction to drive culture change and high impact strategic business initiatives. At the same time, they are able to roll up their sleeves and solve basic employee issues with empathy. Organizations and CEOs need to nurture and empower HR departments to bring out the best from them. They are also employees that need to be inspired and engaged.

When the Titanic hit the iceberg, the iceberg did not sink, the titanic sank.

HR professionals need to continue to be resilient & HR leaders and CEOs should introspect on how they have defined the role of HR and if they are making adequate investments into this critical function.



Building a personal brand

Great talent charts its own growth path

Just as great companies have a great brand, great talent also has its own personal brand that attracts organizations to them.

Building a personal brand is NOT about indulging in self-promotion.

Building a personal brand is about:

- **developing deep expertise in specific areas while having a broad perspective and worldview**
- **being committed to results while being a good team player**
- **being confident while being humble.**

A combination of performance and values is what great brands are made of – whether it is a corporate brand or a personal brand. Great talent they have their own brand recognition and recall. They are self-motivated, self-assured and their success inspires others.

Why is having a personal brand relevant?

Many great companies ceased to exist after a crisis. Eg. AOL after the dot com bubble of 2000, and Lehman Bros after the financial crisis of 2008. Several organizations on Fortune 500 lists are struggling – FMCGs and traditional retail have reduced operations or shut down globally. e.g. Neiman Marcus, JCPenney, Forever 21, ToysRUs, etc.

In all this change, a group of people had gone from being young upstarts who “got it”, to aspirational leaders who were transforming the world, to becoming completely redundant.

When companies died, jobs died, promising careers died. I believe that the lesson from crises is that **there are no safe career options.**

Does this mean that one should not be loyal to their place of work? No, because a *rolling stone gathers no moss*, i.e., it is important to be in a role, assignment or job long enough not only to deliver results but also, to experience the impact of those results over a period of time. This builds professional maturity and wisdom.

However, past crises have shown us that to some degree dependence on only one organization can leave us vulnerable.

When we plan our personal finances, we distribute our savings across various financial investments and build a “portfolio of assets & investments”.

We don't put all our nest eggs in one basket, do we?

Therefore, Is it time for a new definition of professional stability? One that is based on one's skills and talent working for multiple assignments across multiple organizations over our lifetime?

In an ideal world, we should all be 'free agents' – leveraging our knowledge, skills and resources pursuing meaningful work assignments wherever they may be.

With remote working being a far more real and pervasive reality in the future and an increasing interest in leading a more flexible lifestyle with space for family and personal passions, I see a tremendous opportunity in the future of the gig economy.

In fact, most people who have had stellar careers in single organizations will attribute their growth to multiple assignments within the organization. The best companies have always fostered an internal gig like environment. i.e. they provide a diversity of challenging roles & assignments and keep churning talent through the organization often.

Gigs are a perfect example of a performance economy.

You perform, you deliver, you get paid. Sometimes organizations carry 'dead weight' in the form of non-contributing employees. Going back to the concept of minimalism, gigs ensure there is no dead weight.

The right people with the right skills at the right time creates the perfect talent storm that can accelerate innovation and disruption.

Lessons Learnt:

- For organizations, it has always been critical to be agile. The gig economy could become a great source for accessing the right talent at the right time.
- Organizations must also step forward and play a role in the development of the gig economy, especially in India, where the anchors and pressures of having a 'respectable' job and income in the absence of any significant government support, are still very real.
- Similarly, the ecosystem needs to step up and if there is pressure from organizations, I am sure they will too. For example, in India, insurance providers could provide attractive retail benefit coverage and plans that facilitate a greater number of white-collar professionals to step out and take the plunge for gig assignments, while protecting their personal family needs.
- For their part, whether the gig economy develops or not, all professionals must focus on developing their personal brand and credibility as that will make them attractive candidates in any job market – freelance or full time and in any economic situation all over the world. This is my brief.

Community work

Who is responsible?

“

If you are more fortunate than others, build a longer table, not a taller fence”



I love this quote especially in the context of COVID-19 because the virus had the potential to spread fear and divide people and at times we saw traces of that. However the power of community prevailed and people stepped up to help one another.

Every individual could make a difference, and several did in their own way. Some contributed food and financial support in the local areas, while others led large scale initiatives that impacted millions. For eg: A few individuals were at the forefront of supporting Indian's migrants labour through the crisis.

'The Starfish Story', originally by Loren Eiseley and retold several times is the perfect story to illustrate the impact a single person can have on another:

The Starfish Story

A young girl was walking along a beach upon which thousands of starfish had been washed up during a terrible storm. When she came to each starfish, she would pick it up, and throw it back into the ocean. People watched her with amusement.

She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her and said, "Little girl, why are you doing this? Look at this beach! You can't save all these starfish. You can't begin to make a difference!"

The girl seemed crushed, suddenly deflated. But after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she looked up at the man, smiled and replied, "Well, I made a difference to that one!"

author unknown

Lessons Learnt:

- Community work is the responsibility of every one of that makes up the community. Not just NGOs or the Government. As responsible citizens, we must continue to do our bit to improve the lives of the less fortunate. This can be as small as supporting one individual or as large as generating a mass movement to bring positive societal change.
- Similarly, organizations have the power to create a massive social impact. They must invest resources in improving society, the environment and the nations in which they operate. Not only is this the right thing to do, but it also gives them greater relatability with the current generation entering the workforce who care about working for organizations with purpose.

Personal growth

Personal growth enables us to bring our whole selves to work

Those in essential services worked throughout the crisis and words will never be sufficient to thank them for their great service. However, COVID-19 also gave many of us the opportunity to rediscover our passions or explore entirely new ones that we would not have otherwise had the time or energy for.

For e.g. Many people took to cooking, gardening or playing an instrument while being cooped up at home. Not only were these activities cathartic, but they also helped us experience the simple low-cost pleasures of life without stepping out of our homes.

Some parents rediscovered their children by spending more time with them. Some chose to

homeschool their children, while others found it easier to manage a complex work than to teach their child the rules of phonics. Old school and New school came together literally and figuratively.

And most of us re-discovered nature: birds and animals rarely seen in residential areas were seen and heard and we heard, what can only be described as... "peace".

In the words of William Henry Davies, 1911:

**What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass, Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight, Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance, And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare.**



COVID-19 disrupted our lives & gave us time to reevaluate & readjust our priorities for the future.

Lessons Learnt:

- Being fulfilled personally has a direct impact on how we show up at work. It is critical to have some personal interests outside of work ironically, to have more presence at the workplace. The more interests we have, the greater is our ability to connect with colleagues at the workplace as shared interests lead to bonding.
- Greater personal fulfillment also leads to happier, more productive employees and a positive environment at the workplace. Organizations must continue to focus on programs that allow employees to have better work-life integration and enable them not to pursue life goals in addition to the pursuit of organizational success. This will lead to a greater appreciation for the organization and more wholistic from employees.

Bringing it all together

Time to hit 'reset'!



Calamities can cause a lot of damage: not just physical but emotional and psychological as well. They can erode trust between individuals in a family and individuals and companies, as everyone struggles to survive. But calamities also build resilience.

While COVID-19 is probably the biggest calamity of our lifetime, if the past is a reliable predictor of the future, then past global crises even though not at this scale, have shown us that some things will change, and some will remain the same. I think many companies will bounce back, some will fold, many jobs will disappear temporarily, and some will come back again and yet others will become more critical. Perhaps, this is a simplistic view, but,

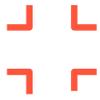
Life and organizations can be as simple or complicated as we make them out to be.

The reality is that none of the lessons here should be new or innovative. They are the stuff good lives and good organizations have been made up of for centuries. In summary,

I believe winning individuals have always known the right thing to do but may not have prioritized some behaviors in the "busyness" of life. I hope that will change in the future.

I believe

winning organizations should be:



- **Minimalistic**

Intensely focused on their purpose and optimizing resources required to achieve it



- **High-tech and high-touch**

Technology supports agility and inclusivity and must be an integral part of organization strategy irrespective of the nature of business.



- **People and results centric**

Organizations must set ambitious goals supported by an inclusive culture that fosters empathy, trust & empowerment to achieve outstanding results and innovation, without the need for command and control.



- **'Schools' of leadership**

Invested in building outstanding people managers who are results and people-focused and good representatives of the organization's culture.



- **Invested in the HR organization**

Cognizant of the role of HR in taking an organization from good to great, and heavily invested in building capability & empowerment at all levels of the HR organization.



- **Socially responsible**

Purpose-driven beyond the achievement of business goals and invested in community & nation-building through financial support as well as employee volunteerism.



- **'Activists' of employee well-being and work-life integration**

Supportive work environments with employee-friendly policies and a culture that fosters the pursuit of personal passions allowing people to re-energize from time to time and bring their best selves to work.

It has been a time for contemplation about the future. When the crisis ends and it will end soon, I hope we will remember nature's wakeup call about the finiteness of life and how small and insignificant we human beings can become in the wake of natural disasters.

I hope COVID-19 has awakened us to our potential as change agents for the future – to build better families, better companies, and a better planet.

Author's profile

Background

1998-2020:

- Experienced **Chief Human Resources** Officer with a successful career of 21 years in Fortune 500 organizations. Reputed for strategic vision, business acumen and building teams. Creator of benchmark people practices recognized by leading industry bodies.
- A global citizen with deep exposure to global markets, cultural transformations, digitalization, technology, productivity and innovation. Lived in India, New York, Tokyo and Singapore.
- Apart from HR Passionate about innovation, social impact initiatives, Inclusion & Diversity. Contributed to building responsible businesses.
- Experience of following industries & organizations:
Technology/eCommerce, media & entertainment, financial services/outsourcing, healthcare and industrial systems
Flipkart/Walmart, Sony Pictures Networks, NBCU/Comcast, GE, Genpact, Xerox
- Featured in Economic Times Women Ahead (2019); Business Today India's hottest young executives (2015), 'Bringing Mothers back to work' award – Baby Chakra (2016), Most Influential HR Leaders, 30 women super achievers award & Global HR Excellence award (2017, 2013,2012)- World HRD forum and others.
- Led people practices that gained organization recognition E.g. Working mother and AVATAR 100 best companies for women in India (2019,2018,2017), Linked in top companies to work for (2019), Aon Hewitt Best Employers India (2017), Top 10 companies in India for health & wellness (2017,'16,'15,'14), etc.

2020

Pursuing new experiences as an entrepreneur. Translating design thinking, empathy and innovation in employee experiences to creating innovative consumer experiences.



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