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Irony & Absurdity – Together
in Imperfect Harmony
Dr.Richard Claydon

Creating safe spaces in
diverse teams: The
role that you play
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Embracing the wholeness
of human beings: A
Humanistic Perspective
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15 year Hiatus – leveraging
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Dr. Smriti Walia

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From the Editor's Desk

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your encouragement that we received for our previous publications and I hope you would like this one too.

Because we live in a time of intelligent machines and conflicted humans, focusing on leadership and culture is even more important these days. You all would have heard about the drama in Open AI. The CEO Mr. Altman was fired by the board and after few days he joined back as the CEO.

The news of Mr. Altman's ouster rocked Silicon Valley and sent journalists in pursuit of breaking developments. By Saturday, Mr. Altman was in talks to return to Open AI— Microsoft had announced Mr. Altman would lead a research group there. Soon, hundreds of Open AI employees threatened to leave and join Mr. Altman at Microsoft.

And then four days after he had been fired, Open AI announced that Mr. Altman would return as chief executive and the board would be overhauled.

In another incident last month, a co-working company WeWork Inc. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in New Jersey. In what is a crash-and-burn story, WeWork saw its net worth sink from nearly \$50 billion less than five years back, to below \$1 per share after news of its bankruptcy filing broke. The stock has tanked 99.8 percent since its initial public offering.

But Adam Neumann is not bankrupt. Thanks to Bill Carmody, the New York trial lawyer who had helped him secure a reported \$480 million settlement from SoftBank, a couple of years ago when Softbank took over the company from him.

Branded as a real-life social network, WeWork claims to transform the way we work. At times, work itself appeared to be an add-on. WeWork envisaged a "We Universe" of gyms, co-living spaces and schools. Venture capitalists loved the play, and poured in billions.

So we live in a time of intelligent machines and conflicted humans . All the more reasons for us to think about culture and leadership as the most important long terms agendas for organisations .

Founder of ODA
Santhosh Babu

Editor
Smriti Walia

Designer
Gurtej Singh Kalsey

Happy Reading

Santhosh Babu

Behavioral Economics, Old wine in the new bottle?

Santhosh Babu
Founder OD Alternatives & Orglens



Santhosh is passionate about supporting leadership teams in creating new possibilities that add value to all stakeholders. An awardee of Life Time Achievement Award from Gestalt Institute, USA, he is the author of India's first book on coaching published by Wiley and was selected as a Thinkers 50 in 2014. Santhosh coach the CEOs and work with several leadership teams driving transformation, culture change and leadership Development.

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Behavioral Economics, Old wine in the new bottle?

Santhosh Babu

Bhutan is a beautiful country and I had the opportunity to live there from 1989 to 1994, exactly five years. I was a 23 year old adventure seeking rebel who wanted to go away from a government job that I was getting in Kerala to a primary school teachers job in a remote Bhutanese district called Dagana.

There was no electricity in the village where I taught, no shops, no medical facilities and I had to walk three days to reach a place from where I can get a vehicle.

Bhutan, we have also heard, is a happy place where people are happier and government focuses on gross national happiness.

I always felt the reason they are happy (in case they are really happy) would be the lack of choices in that country. The World Happiness Report released this year in its annual ranking of the happiest countries in the world and for the sixth year in a row Finland has landed in the top spot. Bhutan is not there on the top ten countries and ranked 97.

So still if Bhutan claims their people are happy, I always thought it could be because of the less choices people had there. When I was there we had just one government newspaper that was published once in a week, no television and even in the capital Thimphu there were few shops and just one cinema hall. I am sure things would have changed now but still very few choices when they want to make a buying decision.

Proving too many choices are not good

Years later Sheena Iyengar a psychologist did the famous jam experiment. At a luxury food store in Menlo Park, a city in California, researchers set up a table offering samples of jam. Sometimes, there

were six different flavours to choose from. At other times, there were 24. We think more choices will make us buy rather than having fewer choices. But Sheena's experiment proved that those who chose from the smaller number were 10 times more likely to actually buy jam: 30 percent versus 3 percent. Having too many options, it seems, made it harder to settle on a single selection. Sounds like the case of Bhutan, having less choices help them lead a contented life. More choice leads to less satisfaction or fulfillment or happiness."

"The secret to happiness is low expectations," says American psychologist Barry Schwartz who wrote the book *The Paradox of Choice*. Our rational brain might tell us that added options can only make us better off as a society. This view is logically compelling, but empirically it isn't true. This is what his book says. When people face more options than they desire—they can experience a wide range of negative outcomes, from frustration and confusion to regret, dissatisfaction, and even choice paralysis. This is something we all have experienced.

Behavioral Economics or social psychology?

Now do you think this insights about choice come under Behavioral Economics? Sheena Iyengar graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a B.S. in economics from the Wharton School and a B.A. in psychology from the College of Arts and Sciences. She then earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Stanford University in 1997.

When it comes to policy making or behavioral change, applications of social or cognitive psychology are now routinely labelled behavioral economics.

The popularity of Behavioral Economics, can be attributed to the book **Nudge Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness** written by

University of Chicago economist and Nobel Laureate Richard H. Thaler and Harvard Law School Professor Cass R. Sunstein, first published in 2008 . The book also popularized the concept of nudge theory . A nudge, according to Thaler and Sunstein is any form of choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without restricting options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must require minimal intervention and must be cheap.

The book and authors also inspired powerful politicians, including former US president Barack Obama and former UK prime minister David Cameron to set up government teams for incorporating nudge theory into public policy.

These "nudge units" became widespread and there are now over 200 of them around the world. But while teams of policymakers appear happy to have been focusing on nudge and making small changes to our decision-making processes, the success of those carefully designed nudges are still a controversy.

Behavioral Economist might sound cool or better.

"It happens to me regularly: I'm an organizational psychologist, but I get introduced at least once a week as a behavioral economist. The first time this happened before a speech, I attempted to set the record straight, telling the executive that all of my degrees were in psychology. His response: "Your work sounds cooler if I call you a behavioral economist." Says Adam Grant, Organisational Psychologist at professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

While social psychologists always believed that our decisions are always influenced by the context. For example the nudge provided by asking people what they intend to do can be accentuated by asking them when and how they plan to do it. This insight falls into the category of what the great psychologist Kurt Lewin called "channel factors," a term he used for small influences that could either facilitate or inhibit certain behaviours. We will talk about channel factors bit more later.

Kurt Lewin's contribution

The father of Organisation Development, Kurt Lewin mentioned that our behavior is a combination of Personality and Environment. This means that "context" plays a big part in our decisions and how we respond to a stimuli.

In 1936, psychologist Kurt Lewin wrote a simple equation that changed the way we think about habits and human behavior. In simple terms, the equation says — the behavior is a function of the Person(P) in their Environment (E). Before Lewin's Equation became famous, most experts believed that a person's habits and actions were a result of the type of person they were, not the surrounding conditions they were in at the time.

Human Behavior = f (P, E)

Wherein,

P — *includes the entirety of the person including their past, their present, their expectations of the future, their personality, their capabilities, their motivations, their desires.*

E — *includes all aspects of the person's environment at the time of any behavior including their physical environment, but also their social environment and contexts.*

Kurt Lewin also coined the term "channel factors," suggesting that certain behaviours can be facilitated by the opening up of a channel (e.g., an a priori commitment or a small, even if reluctant, first step), whereas other behaviors can be blocked by the closing of a channel (e.g., the inability to communicate easily or the failure to formulate a simple plan).

Channel factor is a tiny, seemingly-insignificant details about the environment that can have remarkably huge effects on actual behavior. But they did not call it a Nudge then. One of the most well-known demonstrations of channel factors occurred back in the 1960s, when Howard Leventhal and colleagues wanted to encourage Yale students to go to the student health center and get vaccinated against tetanus.

Although most of the students responded and indicated interest in receiving the vaccines while they were in the lab for the study, only 3% of the

students actually went and got the shot. However, a tiny change managed to increase participation by a factor of *nine*, raising the participation rate to just over 25%. That change was a channel factor then and we might have called it a Nudge now.

That change? Simply providing the students with a map of the campus (on which the health center was circled) and asking them to check their schedules to find a time when they would hypothetically be available to get the shot. All it took to translate good intentions into healthy actions was the simple channel factor of making the action seem convenient and manageable. Remember while we are able to make a Covid 19 vaccine in record time, we were not very successful in nudging everyone to take the vaccine.

Rational beings or emotional beings ?

Psychologists were always interested in figuring out what motivates people to act in certain way but they were no necessarily focusing only on the buying behavior. In the recent decade there was a sudden interest to look at how we make decisions, how we buy and how we can sell .

Robert Cialdini, considered as the leading social scientist in the field of influence, was initially drawn to the topic because he saw how easily people could step over an ethical line into manipulation or even abuse. His 2001 book Influence, which laid out six principles of persuasion and became a best seller . Cialdini is the Regents' Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing . He realised that All decision making is based in emotion. How I feel about a situation will influence my decisions.

Then there is the book , Thinking, Fast and Slow by psychologist Daniel Kahneman. The book's main thesis is a differentiation between two modes of thought: "System 1" is fast, instinctive and emotional; "System 2" is slower, more deliberative, and more logical. This book also became a bible for behavioral economists. Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman explained that we live most of your life on automatic pilot, and we are essentially irrational, and prone to cognitive biases. Something that you would have anyway believed if you are a student of psychology.

The question of if we are rational beings or

emotions beings actually dates back to 17th century. In the middle of the 17th century, philosopher Spinoza and Descartes had opposing views and Spinoza lost to Descarter.

According to Descartes' famous dualist theory, human beings were composed of physical bodies and immaterial minds. Spinoza disagreed. In "The Ethics," his masterwork, published after his death in 1677, he argued that body and mind are not two separate entities but one continuous substance. So Descartes believed "I think therefore I am " and for Spinoza its almost like "I feel therefore I am "

As for Descartes' view of the mind as a reasoning machine, Spinoza thought that was dead wrong. Reason, he insisted, is shot through with emotion. For his beliefs, Spinoza was vilified and almost ignored. Descartes, was considered a visionary. His rationalist doctrine shaped the course of modern philosophy and science.

But psychologists starting from Freud knew and mentioned about that fact that we are emotional beings and now Behavioral Economists are reemphasising that !

So we knew that there are two independent sides of our brain. One is the emotional side, the other the rational side. NYU psychologist **Jonathan Haidt** uses a lovely analogy to explain this. He says that the emotional side is the elephant, the rational side is the rider. The rider of the elephant looks like he or she is in charge, but when there's a disagreement between the elephant and the rider, the elephant usually wins.

So too many choices are not good. Our decisions and behaviours depends on the context and our emotions play a an important part in our decision making. And yes, behavioural economist sounds cooler than just psychologist

So if you believe "I think therefore I am" you might not have been troubled by a mosquito at night. Because if you have been troubled by a mosquito at night you might have very well thought, "I feel, therefore I am ".

Irony & Absurdity - Together in imperfect Harmony

Dr. Richard Claydon
Chief Cognitive Officer, EQ.Lab



Richard is a Leadership coach, ironist and misbehaviourist, whose work examines how people handle the complexity and ambiguity of modern organisational life and how original thought emerges in fast-changing, highly uncertain, often toxic environments via resilient coping methods, such as irony. He has spent over twenty years working in management academia and business as a consultant, manager, coach, speaker, lecturer, and researcher. He helps organisations address organisational misbehaviours, decision-making in complex environments, people and culture as strategy, psychological safety, and collective intelligence.

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Irony & Absurdity - Together in imperfect Harmony

Dr. Richard Claydon

Abstract: Organizational irony is a term used to describe an organisation's ability to act in a counter-cultural way. It is a survival strategy for employees wrestling with the gap between cultural rhetoric and organisational reality. Ironic behaviour is seen as an enabling strategy for executives wrestling with this gap. Ironists and egoistic blockers in organisational environments can cause extreme emotionality, cognitive confusion, burnout and breakdown, self-harming escape attempts, and serious mental and physiological illnesses that can result in permanent harm or even an early death. In this paper, we discuss how organisations can prevent this happening and enable their insights. The only thing preventing these methods, and others like them, from flourishing, is the degree to which many executives are wedded to the complicated strategies, expensive frameworks, and outdated developmental methodologies, also favoured by business schools and big consultancies.

You have joined one of the longest running, funded, research projects on organisational transformation in history.

You have the data from every multidisciplinary academic who has been embedded in the project for the past seven years.

The common theme linking their research is that the most effective people in an organisation, the ones who everybody wants to work with, are also the people (the research identifies as those) who take things little seriously. They constantly poke fun at everything; themselves, co-workers, leadership, the change program, the change managers, the research, the researchers.

This attitude has been termed an "ironic sensibility" by the lead researcher.

It is your job to try and make sense of what exactly is going on.

This is not going to be easy because, although you have some of the most wide-ranging data ever collected, there is little in management literature to explain why an ironic sensibility creates value.

This was the situation confronting me when, as a young PhD candidate, I relocated from Europe to Australia to try to answer this question. The problems I encountered remain the same

today. There is still so little written about it that my explanation risks appearing irrelevant and incomprehensible.

That is the irony of discussing irony!

Irony in Leadership

Irony is seen differently by those analysing leadership from those analysing activity in an organisation.

Within Developmental Psychology, the Leadership Development Framework (LDF) positions the ironic action-logic as the most mature stage of leadership. Over time, leaders in organisations move through eight discrete stages of development until- with enough talent, experience, and luck, they become an ironist.¹

Before moving on, a warning! Leadership has domain specific developmental context. While effective leadership qualities can help you in many situations, they do not necessarily generalise across all areas of your life. Perceiving and enacting leadership with a greater degree of complexity than many others doesn't give you amazing insights about everything. Many past effective leaders have been terrible spouses.

This tendency to shift domain specific context awareness into generalisable ability

becomes more worrisome at group level. Elitism arises when entire groups self-rate themselves as having a higher consciousness than other groups. In organisational practice this is dangerous because it prevents any critique being taken seriously. For example, a typical response from a Teal practitioner to an observation of absurdity in their working practices might be a dismissive "that's because you're orange" (i.e., your level of consciousness is so underdeveloped that you don't even have the capacity to understand what you are trying to critique). The doorway into exclusionary 'isms' lies here. Try to avoid walking through it.

With that double warning out the way, let's continue. **How do we develop ironic leadership maturity?**

The first developmental step occurs in early childhood. Children initially try to opportunistically get what they want without care or awareness of the consequences. In later childhood, they realise these tactics tend to fail whilst upsetting everybody else and risking enmity. Once that realisation occurs, kids adopt a more diplomatic tactical approach.

This initial action → reflection on contradictory outcomes → tactical readjustment of performance developmental shift, that nearly every child experiences, helps us understand similar shifts in leadership development.

In early adulthood we gain expertise in subjects and practices deemed to be useful in society. One individual might learn about medicine, another about finance, a third about risk. Such study makes us increasingly confident about the structures, practices, and rules of our chosen discipline. Our perspective becomes attached to our developing subject-matter expertise. We see the world through this narrow but expert lens.

¹ This framework was devised by William Torbert and Suzanne Cook-Greuter. Developmental Psychology studies how and why humans grow, adapt and change during the course of their lives. It is a leadership specific extension of Freud's psychosexual development model, Piaget's cognitive development model, Kohlberg's moral development model, and Erikson's psychosocial development model (among others). OD professionals are likely to be familiar with at least one of Robert Kegan's five stages of constructive development, the five stages of Teal Organizations, the ten stages of Integral Theory or the eight stages of Spiral Dynamics, which have many similarities with the eight stages of the Leadership Development Framework.

We are then given some leadership power to use our expertise in a complex social system, i.e., a team lead in an organisation. Few are prepared for how their hard-won expertise can or will impact a complex social system. Initially, most 'novice-experts' misapply such power, e.g., by generating organisational bottlenecks by insisting that everything related to their expertise be submitted to them for approval. Some remain like this throughout their careers.

Just like the child who begins to realise that screaming and snatching are counter-productive tactics in the long-term, many 'experts' begin to see the absurdity of methods that create blockages rather than generate connections and develop a more enabling performance. They disseminate and distribute expertise across a small social system (i.e., a team) to achieve their goals more effectively. They begin to direct, coach, support and delegate tasks and responsibilities to people with different levels of knowledge and experience.

The next stage of leadership awareness attends to how the wider organisational system impacts its general performance. This level of awareness is, ironically, both the entry-point into effective enterprise-level leadership and a potential career-ender. Very often, people who develop system-level awareness start to ignore rules they believe to be counter-productive or absurd. This brands them as troublemakers. Many remain stuck at this level, regarded as too risky for promotion. Others, who are rejected by the organisation, reinvent themselves as coaches or consultants.

Those that survive this stage do so through the development of a sophisticated performance. They recognise that openly breaking rules, no matter how absurd the rule might be, is counterproductive, so create coalitions and alliances with people in positions of power who can sponsor and support their desire to change the rules. This involves being able to address the "what's in it for me" question that others will pose to anybody suggesting a complex system-impacting change. If they can illustrate how fixing a systems-absurdity will positively impact the strategic aims of others, they will gain the support they need. This requires them to understand how powerful colleagues see the system so they can speak to them in their own language.

For the final stages we need to detour into quantum physics! Max Planck, one of the founding fathers of quantum theory, made a couple of observations relating to radical new ways of perceiving reality. The first being:

"When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

In this quote, Planck is referring to the famous double-slit experiment in which, depending on how you try to observe it, light is seen as either particles or waves. In organisational terms, this might translate into an organisation being both an entity comprising buildings and hierarchies as well as a process of interlinked human interactions and conversations. Alternatively, an organisation might be seen as a machine whose inputs and outputs need fixing while also regarded as an organism where environmental conditions and evolutionary demands must be identified so that necessary adaptive actions can be applied. With each observational shift, different solutions become possible.²

A perfect example is the DBS Bank reframing itself from a bank that uses technology to a technology company that does banking. This transformed it from worst-performing Singaporean bank (DBS = Damn Bloody Slow!) to the first bank to ever hold the three major global banking industry awards simultaneously. This doesn't mean that this specific perspective switch will work for you and your company. It might, but so might another. Or a combination of others. You must go and find them.

At this level of attentiveness, you are no longer fixing absurdities within a system, but comparing one system-perspective with other system-perspectives. The goal is now to transform the entire system. When something of this scale and complexity gains your attention, you will no longer benefit from finding people with similar aims within your own system. Instead, you will need people who have radically different insights.

²Skilled critical systems thinkers can generate multiple possibilities for action by drawing upon a vast and diverse range of attentive lenses.

The second relevant Planck quote relates to getting an entire generation of thinkers to see things from a radically different perspective.

"a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it"

In the business world, this is represented by the shift between the shareholder perspective that solidified in the 60s and 70s, and the stakeholder perspective taking root today. It's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get people embedded in the shareholder perspective to understand why or how the stakeholder perspective might be valuable.

Even powerful examples of its efficacy don't make much impact. In 2003, the writers of Firms of Endearment identified twenty-eight firms, including Amazon, Google, and Costco, that operated via a stakeholder perspective. They outlined a series of seemingly counter-intuitive leadership practices which they defined as "ironic management." Later this became Conscious Capitalism.

The core strategic practice of such companies was to dedicate resources to making the world a better place. This was considered a more effective wealth-building strategy than focusing only on creating shareholder value. To support this, they:

- Decentralized decision making, which increased rather than decreased top executive influence at all levels of the company.
- Paid frontline staff above market rate which, rather than increasing costs, reduced the percentage of a revenue dollar that went into wages.
- Eliminated most conventional marketing practices while experiencing explosive growth due to all stakeholders generating word-of-mouth promotion.
- Ignored the expectations of Wall Street analysts while achieving higher price/earnings ratios by acting on the expectations and analyses of all stakeholders.

While the goal of making a better world has

influenced a plethora of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives and greater interest in and regulation of Environment, Sustainability and Governance, how many organisations have started to act in these counter-cultural ways?

If anything, the opposite has happened, with greater centralisation, front-line wage stagnation, massive levels of digital marketing, and frantic responses to Wall Street pronouncements.

Why?

Firstly, there is some absurdity in the model itself. If every organisation paid above the average market rate for front-line staff, there soon wouldn't be an average. Companies would enter into an arms race of wage increases until front-line staff were being paid ridiculous amounts. One piece of easily attackable logic can derail an entire idea, obfuscating the good stuff.³

Secondly, the figures presented in the book are so jaw-droppingly better than market averages that they are likely to promote feelings of incredulity and/or hyper-defensiveness in senior executives, who don't want to look foolish for having done the opposite for so long. The return to investors in the twenty-eight Firms of Endearment against the S&P 500 were:

- After 3 years: 73% v 38%
- After 5 years: 128% v 13%
- After 10 years: 1,026% v 122%

For a hard-line believer of the old way protecting their practices and legacies, the combination of a what seems to be a logical absurdity with such extravagant claims about value creation is likely to engender cognitive dissonance and strengthen a belief in their own views and methods. This contrasts with a younger generation growing up in the new stakeholder discourse who find the belief in "shareholder value above all" absurd and harmful. The output is intergenerational antagonism – Boomers egotistically destroying the future v lazy and entitled Generation Zs.

³The argument has been reformulated via the notion that the psychological impact of financial well-being rather than being paid more than industry average might be causal of increased value creation. Ideas such as paying front-line staff a living wage or providing a universal basic income address the same problem without causing a wage arms race.

Ultimately, both sides have absurdities to wrestle with. While they are backed with rigid beliefs and open anger, rather than with wry smiles and ironic awareness, conciliation and progress is difficult. Irony in leadership research calls for the development of ironically sensible leaders who can connect such disparate groups into a meaningful whole.

One of the biggest challenges towards achieving this, is that an ironic sensibility in more junior people is rarely seen as an indicator of leadership potential, but of inauthenticity and troublemaking.

Irony in Organisations

In organisational culture research, ironic behaviour is seen as a survival strategy for employees wrestling with the gap between cultural rhetoric and organisational reality. It questions whether the organisational culture aspiration of loyal, hard-working, and enthusiastic employees who enjoy their work while creating value is matched by real-world achievement.

It makes a couple of very strong claims.

Employees who genuinely believe in the cultural vision, mission and values of an organisation are far more likely to struggle. This zealous attachment affects their personal life, resulting in failed marriages, physical and mental illness and even untimely death through heart attacks or suicide. This personal suffering isn't alleviated by commensurate professional success. True believers in the cultural norms are less likely to be assigned high profile projects because their zeal makes them difficult to work with. They are far more likely to be assigned to failing ones, because their zeal also makes it more likely they'll accept them. Consequently, their reputation for being able to deliver disintegrates and they fail both professionally and personally.

In contrast, employees who see the gap between the cultural rhetoric and the organisational reality develop a capacity to navigate these difficulties. Aware of two realities being played out simultaneously, they learn to adapt their performances to fit, alternating between the stances of cultural loyalist and organisational sceptic.

The research condemned these contradictory performances as evidence that a strong organisational culture had failed to develop loyal, hard-working, and enthusiastic employees. Instead, it had created inauthentic and ironic game-players who employed Machiavellian tactics to ensure personal success while only paying lip-service to wider organisational goals and ideals. Responding to such revelations, leadership and organisational development practitioners have long tried to train employees out of such tactics and make them more empathetic and authentic. This might be absurdly counter-productive.

My own research positions organisational irony somewhat differently from the above, being more aligned with it being a powerful quality of hidden leadership during complex change than evidence of inauthenticity and bad fit. In this reading of organisational irony, the research team was looking at various phenomena of long-term organisational transformation in a multi-disciplinary, fully funded, access-all-areas, seven-year project. The transformational direction was towards self-managed teams, customer-focused production, and new digital technologies, delivered via "best practice" change management models and external consultants.

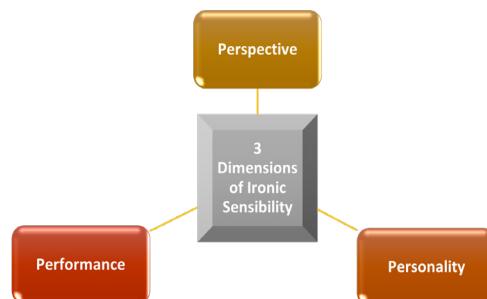
The work environment undergoing change was comprised of highly specialised, very experienced, and extremely well-compensated employees who had little previous exposure to or interest in any leadership, management, or organisational theories. Many had strong and very different perspectives as to what was required for the change to be successful than the consultants. The length of the research enabled the data collection team to develop an unusually deep understanding of contextual happenings while forging meaningful relationships with the employees. Over time, observational, interview-oriented, and interventional researchers all began to report the same thing. While the change management team remained zealots for change despite many employees openly resisting it, one group of employees consistently solved emerging problems, creating new value. These were the people they termed as having an ironic sensibility.

These employees made the effort to understand the rhetoric of the transformation and why it was

failing to engender much enthusiasm, wrestled with the practices and processes the change management team tried to implement, as well as the tactics and tricks via which they were resisted, and then got things done within the messy organisational reality. They worked around the changes, which appeared to have been implemented as planned whilst operating in completely different ways. All of this was done accompanied by jokes and a somewhat colourful good humour. Despite the clear value of their work, their ironic sensibility ensured they were not considered as having leadership potential.

The Mechanics of the Ironic Sensibility: The 3 Ps

The ironic sensibility comprises three dimensions – perspective, performance, and personality.



1: The Ironic Perspective

The ironic sensibility emerges around the awareness of incongruence within a system. Statements of intent don't match subsequent actions. Aspirations don't match achievements. The rhetoric doesn't match the reality. Values don't match behaviours. Yet, nearly everybody behaves if everything is working as expected.

When that happens, any observation of environmental incongruence is accompanied by a feeling of personal incongruence, the feeling that who we are (our perceived self) doesn't align with who we want to be (the ideal self). It can't do when we are knowingly and continually acting in an absurd manner and doing nothing about it.

In such conditions, some experience cognitive dissonance, using various psychological mechanisms to defend the ideal self against the absurd situation, rationalising away their doubts and, over time, embracing the new ways of doing things. Others cynically resist and cling tightly to the old. Many, possibly even the majority, wrestle with the ambiguity.

This often doesn't end well. The pressures of wrestling with this incongruence of self can cause extreme emotionality, cognitive confusion, burnout and breakdown, self-harming escape attempts and serious mental and physiological illnesses that can result in permanent harm or even an early death.

The ironic sensibility is a healthy alternative stance. Expect and embrace absurdity as a permanent aspect of your existence and develop a sense of self that entangles with it. Instead of breaking down in the face of absurdities and ambiguities, meet them with a wry smile and an ironic stance.

2: The Ironic Performance

Imagine you identify an organisational absurdity that is the result of decisions made by your immediate manager. You recognise it is causing damage. What do you do?

Directly pointing it out carries substantial risk. Very few bosses are going to take kindly to suggestions that their decision was foolish, no matter how much evidence to the contrary. There's a very good chance you will be heavily sanctioned and harm your career prospects if you do this.

There is also a risk that you are being foolish, especially if you are inexperienced. What if the absurdity you are seeing is down to your limited perspective and a more complex plan is in place. You are going to appear naïve if this is the case. Speaking out without knowing whether anybody else feels as you do is foolhardy.

The ironic performance plots a safe(ish) path through two equally unpleasant alternatives. You need to be sure the absurdity is real before acting, which means finding out if others see it too. However, by pointing it out overtly you risk making yourself visible and being branded a troublemaker.

Thus, the ironic performance involves saying one thing while meaning another. If your audience picks up on your ironic intention, it will deconstruct the actual meaning behind your words and actions. This offers a degree of protection. If nobody picks up on the irony, either the absurdity

is not real or you overtly pointing it out would have been a risky endeavour. If some members of the audience do pick up on it, however, then there's a good chance the absurdity is real. Once a group of people have seen and bonded over an absurdity, overtly pointing it out becomes less risky.

In the organisational context things become a little more complex because the work also needs to be done. The employees' verbal ironic performance thus extends into an enacted ironic performance. The team needs appear as if it is doing what it is being asked while creating value in a completely different way. Consequently, the entire way the bonded group interacts with the organisation becomes coloured by irony.

If this seems strange, examine any digital transformation you have been involved in. Remember how the customer-facing shiny frontstage hid a messy backstage in which people were interacting with incompatible technologies, practices and processes to keep things operational in any way they could. It's that. All the way down.

A skilled ironic performance results in powerful people deconstructing the irony in the belief that they were the first to have seen the absurdity. While this means the original ironist won't be punished, it also means their original insight remains unrewarded. Any subsequent attempt by them to gain credit for their observation still carries the risk of being sanctioned. Thus, these ironists remain hidden from organisational power and routinely fail to get the recognition they deserve.

Finally, there's irony's edge.

Every ironic performance, however well-intentioned and well-constructed, can be interpreted as Socratic or Satiric.

- Performances seen as Socratic result in people becoming aware of a more complex reality and making better and more sophisticated decisions in response.
- Performances seen as Satiric result in the ironic performer being sanctioned for dissent and subordination. The listeners don't hear an ironic call to "look at this absurd situation". They hear a personal sarcastic attack of "look at this absurd situation. It is your fault, you fools!"

The emotional pain they feel is as real as physical pain. Sarcasm means to strip the flesh. If that happens to someone in power, retribution can be swift.

3: The Ironic Personality

Somebody developed the habit of attending to the world through gaps, ambiguities, absurdities, follies, contradictions, and paradoxes. They have also developed the capacity to communicate their insights calmly and elegantly to powerful others. **They exist on a tightrope, exquisitely poised between the capacity to see absurdities in serious situations and the risk of transmitting critical insights to power.**

Eventually, living ironically catches up with even the best. Socrates and Cicero met with sticky ends. Oscar Wilde, Jonathan Swift, Voltaire, and Rabelais were imprisoned, exiled, or excommunicated. The same happens to most organisational ironists. Despite the clear value of uncovering unseen absurdities and generating transformational potentiality, just one ill-judged performance risks the ire of a powerful leader.

Towards an Irony-Free & Non-Absurd Organisational Reality

The ironic sensibility emerges when people fear sanctions too much to point out incongruencies in the presence of power so become covertly proactive instead. Given the undoubted value of organisational ironists in complex and ambiguous environments, how can organisations prevent this happening and enable their insights?

There are two possible end-goals.

One is to create the utopian organisation, so perfectly designed that no absurdity can ever manifest. Consequently, every interaction is genuine and authentic and all ironic activity evidence of bad fits and troublemakers. Majority of leadership literature and organisational consulting seems to regard this as the ultimate utopian goal.

The second accepts that gaps, ambiguities, absurdities, follies, contradictions, and paradoxes are central to the human condition. Compliant activity in such conditions is foolish, while

multi-perspective ironic interactions facilitate their being addressed before they cause harm. Although this is an arguably more plausible description of organisational reality, it is a much more marginal perspective.

We have seen many attempts to shift organisations in this direction.⁴ Most do so for a while, then sink under the weight of utopian promises.

Agile Method is a great example. The initial absurdity it overcame is clear. In the software age, what could be more absurd than taking two years to design a product, only to find that it isn't what customers wanted and that the hardware it was designed for is now obsolete.

Agile's answer was to become interactionist and iterative. Ask the customers what they think they want, then design it quickly, test, gather feedback and reiterate (as any agilest knows, the customer never knows what they want until they see it). In an Agile project, very many of the things asked for by the customer are initially perceived as absurd by the coders, whilst many things designed by the coders are initially seen as absurd by the customers. Regular interactions and iterations help discover what is people really want and mean and prevent minor interpretation errors from amplifying into costly mistakes. People become deeply engaged in the development process. Irony is not needed because overt communication is central to the development process throughout.⁵

⁴As far back as the 1920s Mary Parker Follett was addressing the social turbulence in urban Boston by solving problems through relational activity, integrated differences, participative dialogues, contingent authority and common purpose. A decade later, Kurt Lewin illustrated that a democratic-participative mode of leadership increased productivity, improved quality, reduced toxicity and accelerated change in complex and collaborative work environments. Post WWII, Herbert Simon won the Nobel Prize in Economics for illustrating how bounded decision-making absent the insights of diverse perspectives was likely to lead to economic failure. In the early days of the SWOT analysis, it was employed to ensure all managers would identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that they could perceive from their position in the organisation, creating a multi-perspective mosaic of possibilities. During the rise of strategic planning, Henry Mintzberg consistently pointed out that at least 70% of successfully realised strategies emerged from semi-formal conversations in the body of the organisation rather than in formal strategy exercises.

⁵ Psychological safety has the same function. In a psychologically safe team, people feel safe to openly ask questions, admit to or point out mistakes, suggest ideas, and, vitally, to challenge the status quo. Irony is not required.

In the two decades since its conceptualisation, Agile has itself morphed into a utopian promise that generates undiscussable absurdities. It is now being sold as THE way to speed up productivity while reducing cost in organisational-wide frameworks for all projects in all environments no matter the context. Yet, since its widespread implementation, productivity has flatlined.

In traditional hierachal systems, it creates increased tensions between management and teams. Turnover is spiralling. It's increasingly difficult to find people with the requisite skillsets to do the work. Tales of toxic organisations are commonplace.

Perfect conditions for the ironic sensibility. The problem is finding Agile ironists, who are, after all, experts at hiding themselves.

To try and do so, we designed a questionnaire that could help uncover enabling ironists and egoistic blockers in organisational environments. Social network analysis can reveal stoppages in the system where there should be flow, revealing who in power blocks rather enables. It also reveals flow in unexpected places, facilitated by hidden actors doing backstage work that keeps things running smoothly. Ironists at play. Relational network analysis can reveal the quality of relationships between people, which can reveal pockets of unexpected connection and meaning. Again, ironists at play.

Although they are powerful methods, very few organisations are open to deploying the above. While such analyses reveal hidden pockets of value-creating activity, they also put into stark relief which senior executives are blocking flow. There are a couple of tools/techniques that help circumnavigate this problem.

Recent advancements in data collection technologies enable the anonymous real-time, global collection of micro-narratives relating to what people think about their lived organisational reality. Narrative analytics software captures and clusters thousands of organisational stories at speed, providing an organisation-wide map of what people think is effective or absurd, enabling executives to rapidly identify and strategise

ways to amplify valuable activities or dampen destructive errors. As these stories focus on revealing hidden possibilities and absurdities across the whole organisation rather than identifying specific people as the cause, there's a greater feeling of safety.

Another effective anti-absurdity irony-revelatory intervention methodology involves the 33 practices comprising the open-source Liberating Structures portfolio, which "misdirect" people into revealing what they really think about organisational reality in an enabling and energising manner. In my experience, a well-facilitated day of Liberating Structures within the body of an organisation can help transform an abstract strategic idea into 100s of achievable action-plans at the fraction of a cost of hiring external change consultants.

The only thing preventing these methods, and others like them, from flourishing, is the degree to which many executives are wedded to the complicated strategies, expensive frameworks and outdated developmental methodologies favoured by business schools and big consultancies.

These all promise exquisitely planned, rational transformations delivered by professional change management experts who will ensure all employees follow best practices while remaining engaged with the work. But what if it is this very expectation that is the absurd one?

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Creating safe spaces in diverse teams: The role that YOU play

Shilpa Yohannan

Head of people Advisory, Europe &
Headquarters, A.P. Moller- Maersk



Shilpa is a seasoned leader in the field of human resources, with over twenty years of experience across various industries including IT services, heavy engineering, food and beverage, and pharmaceuticals. She earned her Masters from SCMRD, Pune, and has worked for companies such as Eli Lilly, Wipro, and most recently AP Moeller Maersk. Throughout her career, Shilpa has been instrumental in shaping dynamic employee ecosystems, driving people transformation, and leading change management and organization redesign initiatives. Her journey in the People Function has been marked by her pursuit of excellence and her commitment to driving positive change. Having worked in four continents, she is a true global citizen and is passionate about transforming organizations and empowering individuals to achieve their fullest potential. Currently, Shilpa works as a people leader at AP Moeller Maersk and is based in Lisbon, Portugal.

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Creating safe spaces in diverse teams: The role that YOU play

Shilpa Yohannan

Abstract: It is often said, “Diversity is been invited to the party; Inclusion is being asked to dance”. We forget about the music though. Creating safe spaces is the music that brings everything together. And This, is my playlist....

Growing up in an army family, moving every three years was normal for me. When I was in tenth standard, my 5th city and 6th school; I remember how surprised I was that a “new” close friend had studied in the same school from kindergarten to tenth. It was the first time I realized that my “normal” could be different from someone else. Looking back, my childhood probably prepared me for a career and life that spans four continents and multiple cities; making me either the odd one out or being in the company of many odd-one-outs.

Currently, I am the leader of a team that consists of individuals from various cultural backgrounds. None of my direct team members share the same nationality. I am also part of a peer group that is diverse in nationality, gender, and ethnicity among others. Extensive research has proven the tangible benefits of having diverse teams, and my own experience has shown me that solutions produced by teams that have diversity of thought and perspective are innovative, holistic, and reliable. Additionally, I have learned a great deal about myself on a human level by leading and being part of a diverse team in recent years. That said, diverse teams are also prone to misunderstandings, conflicts, and ultimately lack of trust; If not managed well, can lead to the temptation of individual team members to conform rather than cause conflict, thus losing the very essence of diversity. Through my journey of working in and leading diverse teams, I have realized that it takes intent and deliberate actions by the leader to build cohesive, inclusive, high-on-trust teams. The first step to which, in my opinion, is to create safe spaces for team members to show up as their authentic selves. Creating safe and inclusive spaces requires focus and prioritization on an organizational level, however, there are

many things that a leader could practice and encourage their team to practice on an individual level.

- **Practice self-awareness.**

Cam Caldwell, Ph.D., an author and professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, says, “Self-awareness is an effort. It’s a conscious effort to invest in understanding who we are, who others are, our universal rules that we apply in life, and our commitment to the future.” Self-awareness is not only knowing yourself, your behaviors, and your motivators better but also knowing how you show up in relation to others in a given context.

While increasing self-awareness is a prerequisite for any good leader, it becomes even more important in a diverse team. We all carry implicit biases of different types. These biases often creep into our decisions and behaviors toward colleagues. Therefore, questioning those biases as a habit helps with better decision-making. It also helps leaders understand their team members better and allows for a more inclusive space. Additionally, the attributes that helped one succeed in a certain context might not be true anymore or even be detrimental in the current context and therefore require moderation/change. I didn’t realize that despite leaving India so many years ago, I carried many ways of working from that cultural context. A lot of who I am comes from there and was maybe my driver of success, yet not all of it was appropriate for my current context. I needed to do a lot of unlearning as a leader to build a collaborative team. I look at the habit of increasing self-awareness as an investment in my own growth. It has helped me develop an understanding of all the tools I have within me to adapt to situations/circumstances and teams.

One way of increasing self-awareness is to seek periodic feedback from a variety of stakeholders which includes your direct team. Listen to what is said, but also try to listen to what is not said. And then visibly act on that feedback. This doesn't mean that you need to change yourself or become different versions for different people. However, look at the essence of the feedback and then act on that – acting on it could also mean setting expectations that it would not be possible. It is also important to be mindful that feedback might not necessarily come during a formal dialogue. Every conversation is an opportunity to get feedback. It takes practice to listen and then look at yourself objectively. From experience, I know that seeking and working on feedback has not only been essential to my development as a leader but also helped me foster deeper, honest, and open relationships with colleagues.

There is no denying that we carry our biases with us; for a good reason too. Human beings developed biases as a survival mechanism. Those biases may not serve us in our current contexts. On the contrary, they may play a part in creating toxic and fearful workspaces. The first step is to be aware of those biases. There are many implicit bias tests that are available that one could do. I recommend the Harvard implicit bias test.

Making a habit of taking time out to step back, pause, and reflect is also another powerful tool. I have often used it especially while working with team members who do not have a working style or motivational driver similar to mine. Just taking the time to step back and understand their drivers, embrace the difference, and work with it has helped build trust and accountability in situations that could have the potential to create fear and uncertainty within those team members.

Insights into oneself could also come through different self-assessment tests that are available. I prefer using holistic assessment tools and maybe more than one tool to help give different perspectives. Combining findings from the assessment tool with feedback from stakeholders can be very insightful. I do however caution anyone who uses these assessment tools to use them as an insight and not box themselves or others.

We are people and ever-evolving and therefore building self-awareness is a journey that never stops. One should look at assessments/feedback from that perspective.

- **Embrace unique strengths.**

Each one of us has strength. According to Gallup, teams that focus on strengths every day have 12.5% greater productivity, and teams that receive strengths feedback have 8.9% greater profitability. A core differentiator of a diverse team is the different perspectives and strengths they bring to the table. A good example of harnessing the strengths of individuals is any team sport. Look at football, for example, each player plays a different yet important role. A goalkeeper is as important as a forward, a defender, or a mid-fielder. One without the other cannot succeed, additionally, a good goalkeeper might not be a good forward or vice versa. Each player plays to their strengths and contributes differently to the eventual performance of the team.

In organizations while the principle remains the same, those roles and strengths might not be that distinct. As a leader, therefore, it is important to first be aware of the individual strengths of team members and then be explicit about them, both to the individual and to the team. It allows team members to appreciate the value of each other, especially if all they see on the outside are differences. I have found using Gallup Clifton's strength finder a particularly good to identify and share individual strengths within the team. One could also encourage team members to seek feedback about their strengths from stakeholders and then share it with the rest of the team. While the strengths-finder approach is scientific, seeking feedback on strengths gives a stakeholder's perspective.

Each person leverages different strengths and encouraging them to share not just the "what" of their achievements but elaborate on the "how" of their journey helps the rest of the team appreciate the different roads to success.

As a leader of a diverse team, I am spoilt for choice in leveraging different strengths of individuals to reach a common goal. I am, however, often faced with the challenge of ensuring that all the different strengths are given equal value, especially when they might be contrary to what I sometimes think is needed. For example, in complex projects that have multiple stakeholders and tight deadlines, a team member with a highly structured and autocratic approach might clash with or not see value in someone who is consultative in their approach. Whereas a consultative approach might just be what would be needed to get buy-in from the various stakeholders. As a leader of a team with extreme diversity, a big part of my responsibility has been to balance the need for conformity and appreciate different points of view. For someone with a very high need for control, my learning has been to control the impact/result and let go of the need to control the process.

- **Assume positive intent.**

Human beings are complex creatures. We carry a set of beliefs, perspectives, and experiences that shape our interactions with our colleagues. In diverse teams, the lack of shared context can sometimes heighten mistrust and cause misunderstanding. My early memory of working with my peer group which was diverse in nationality, new to each other, and delivering a high-visibility, complex project, was us out-shouting each other in every virtual team meeting (it didn't help that we formed this team at the start of covid). We did not know each other and did not trust each other; resulting in every conversation starting with us needing to defend our individual stance, therefore not solving any problem. As a team, we have come a long way since then, with collaboration being a significant team strength; something that made a big difference was to assume positive intent from each other.

When we start from a baseline that everyone in the team and the organization at large is here to do their best and has positive intentions, it leads to lowering barriers and reducing hostility, especially in high-pressure environments. It allows team members to become candid and share their unfiltered thoughts without the fear of judgment. Assuming positive intent also allows you, as a leader, to explore deeper reasons as to why something works or doesn't. Digging deeper helps solve the problem and not change the person. Assuming positive intent, like everything else requires constant practice; knowing yourself and others helps.

When something doesn't work, or when I am in conflict with someone in the team or the organization, and when biases kick in, I have made it a habit to pause and ask myself a set of questions to dig deeper, the first of them being "Are we aligned on what we want the end impact to be?"

- **Look for commonalities.**

For teams to be successful it is important that individuals identify with the group and feel proud to be a part of it; The higher the collective team identification, the more likely team members work for the same team, the same future, goals, and vision therefore are more collaborative and successful.

However, as people, we are tribal in nature and look for similarities to build relationships and connect with others. In a diverse team, it could be overwhelming to see no one like you and therefore shut down. The truth, however, is that

we as humans have far more in common than not. The trick is to invest time to get to know people on a deeper level and then find the commonalities.

And that requires time and genuine curiosity about the person behind the persona. One-on-one time with team members, whether virtually or in

real-time should be non-negotiable. I often battled with small talk, and like many others, Covid while horrific helped me get to know my colleagues beyond their work personas. Just getting to know them on a different level helped me appreciate so many commonalities among us despite our varied backgrounds.

My learning therefore has been to dig deeper and find those commonalities in diverse teams. It could be a shared goal that could bring them together, or the love of good food, travel or books, or life experiences. It could be anything – what is important is that individuals in a team see that they have more in common than what meets the eye, and their differences add and not take away from them as a team.

I have been in different teams in the last couple of decades and irrespective of the demographic, each of those carried diversity of some scale - We as people are different and as leaders, we must not forget that. Creating safe spaces for any team therefore requires all the above and more. In a team that has a demographic mix of different nationalities, genders, ethnicities, etc, the need just becomes heightened due to a lack of shared context. Sometimes, all it takes for a misunderstanding to occur is the lack of common understanding of the usage of a particular language! It then becomes a leader's responsibility to create that shared context to build trust, and that takes time and emotional investment. It is an investment well worth its time – there is little as rewarding to see a team that is so diverse come together and work through their differences and collaborate and grow not just as a team but as individuals.

Embracing the Wholeness of Human Beings: A Humanistic Perspective

Mark T. Fernandes

Sr. Vice President, HR & Head-
Organisation Development, Employee
Experience and DE&I, Kotak Life



Mark Fernandes is a Senior Vice President with Kotak Mahindra Life Insurance Company. He heads OD, DEI and Employee Experience for the organisation. An adjunct professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, (TISS), Mumbai, he is also a contributing journalist to national dailies on the beats of business, art/culture, and socio-political issues.

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Embracing the Wholeness of Human Beings: A Humanistic Perspective

Mark T. Fernandes

The humanistic approach in psychology and organisational development (OD) emphasises the inherent worth and potential of individuals and organisations. It advocates for a partnership role, focusing on strengths and co-creation, rather than fixing or rescuing. Emphasis is placed on walking with clients through challenges with empathy, respecting their abilities, and fostering self-discovery. This approach encourages recognising individual and organisational wholeness and potential, by co-facilitating growth through various interventions.

In the realm of psychology, the humanistic approach offers a profound perspective that embraces the inherent worth and potential of individuals. It recognises that every person possesses an innate capacity for growth, self-actualisation, and personal fulfilment. Humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow have made significant contributions to this approach by developing theories and therapeutic techniques that prioritise the individual's subjective experiences for personal growth. The focus, when using this approach, is on the inherent power and potential of individuals, acknowledging their completeness and resilience.

Instead of assuming a rescuer or fixer role as OD professionals, we are called to play the role of a trusted-partner on the journey of self-discovery and transformation for our Clients /organisations. A partner who appreciates that in the realm of OD, it is crucial to recognise that

individuals and organisations are not passive recipients, but active participants in their own development. They possess the capacity to create positive change, and it is their (OD professional's) responsibility to help them (Client) tap into this potential.

This perspective aligns with the principles of appreciative inquiry, which focuses on strengths, possibilities, and the co-creation of a desired future.

When encountering individuals or organisations facing challenges or operating in a state of darkness, it is essential to avoid assuming a position of superiority or expertise. Instead, we must approach them with humility, respect, and a deep belief in their inherent abilities. By recognising their wholeness, we are able to guide them towards reconnecting with their inner light.

Connecting with light is about acknowledging the darkness and working with it.

Walking with someone through the darkness implies being a compassionate and non-judgmental presence in their lives and space. It means actively listening to their stories, fears, and aspirations without imposing our own agenda or solutions. This requires creating a safe space where individuals feel comfortable to explore their vulnerabilities, acknowledge their limitations, and reflect on their unique strengths and resources.

In the process of aiding people or organisations in remembering their light, individuals are encouraged to reconnect with their values, passions, and purpose. By helping them identify and leverage their existing strengths, we facilitate a deeper understanding of their own potential. This is achieved through various OD interventions such as coaching, mentoring, team building, and leadership development programs.

By reframing challenges as opportunities for growth and learning, individuals and organisations can navigate the darkness with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence.

As OD practitioners, we must strive to create a supportive environment that fosters learning, experimentation, and risk-taking for Clients. Through dialogue, safe open confrontation, feedback, and reflection, we encourage individuals to embrace change, learn from failures, and celebrate successes.

Ultimately, our role is not to rescue, fix, or heal, as OD professionals, but to empower and support individuals and organisations on their journey towards self-discovery and growth. By recognising their inherent power and wholeness, and by walking alongside them as they remember their light, we enable them to tap into their full potential and create positive change in their lives and in the growth of organisations.

The humanistic approach is vital for OD professionals because it promotes individual empowerment, fosters a positive organisational culture, supports authentic leadership, prioritizes employee development, embraces inclusivity, and integrates well-being and work-life balance.

Conclusion:

The humanistic approach provides a powerful framework for understanding and supporting individuals in their journey towards self-discovery and personal transformation. By recognising the power within people and organisations, embracing their wholeness, and walking alongside them with empathy and compassion, we open up new possibilities for growth, self-fulfilment, and a genuine connection with ourselves, others and, with organisations.

"I will not rescue you, for you are not powerless. I will not fix you, for you are not broken. I will not heal you, for I see you in your wholeness. I will walk with you through the darkness as you remember your light."

Leader as a Facilitator

Sushmita Usha Devarajan
Partner, OD Alternatives

Sushmita is an internationally certified Mediator, Coach, Trainer, and Dialogue Facilitator. She has worked with corporations, NGOs, government organisations, educational institutions, and individuals. Specialising in conflict transformation, she serves as the co-program director and guest faculty for the 'Workplace Conflict' training in the Executive Education Programs of IIM-Bangalore. Sushmita has been a trainer of trainers and a lead trainer for a UN-certified advanced facilitation training at a US-based peace-building organisation for more than a decade. She has trained, coached and mentored diverse professionals from across the globe in the art of facilitation.

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Leader as a Facilitator

Sushmita Usha Devarajan

Abstract: Facilitative leadership approach is desired by leaders and teams alike because it comes closest to enabling a motivated performing happy team among all leadership styles. And yet is looked at with apprehension - 'is it really possible to practice it?' - the core of which seems rooted in the limiting belief that has shaped today's world - one loses if the other wins. Facilitation skills in the facilitative approach is about acknowledging and valuing everyone in the team and thus it encourages people and teams to be the best version of themselves. How? By the leader co-creating and practicing with their team non-judgmental learning and growth mindset; by the leader redefining the limiting belief to 'we win together, and we learn from our losses'.

'How is it possible to listen to each one in my team?' is a question that has come up quite often in my sessions on facilitation. When I ask what the challenge was - the assumption that 'to listen to and to acknowledge' would mean 'to agree' surfaces from the participants.

I would mirror their statement to them and ask if I got what they meant, to which they would respond with a 'yes'. I would then add that listening and acknowledging are not the same as agreeing, that they are different things and point to the fact that we disagreed on this point of view and yet they feel heard. At least for some of them, this is like an 'aha' moment.

The core element of the facilitative approach is active listening - creating and holding a space where everyone feels heard, and where everyone is open to hearing. In such a space agreements or disagreements become immaterial because the space is felt by each one as one of co-creation and co-learning – a space that inquires into what is right, and not into who is right.

What is the facilitative approach? According to Jane Humphries, of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University, "Facilitative leadership is a reciprocal process between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow." Rather than being "something that is done to people," facilitative leadership involves working with and through other people to achieve organizational goals," Humphries writes. Facilitative leadership involves providing direction and support without being

controlling.

Why the facilitative approach?

In my observation, the participants in my sessions fall broadly into 3 categories when it comes to the facilitative approach to leadership. Some have tried it, have struggled, and have somewhat lost hope, some think of it as an impossibility – as in against one's basic instinct, and some are curious and want to learn it because they feel aligned with the idea of it.

Despite the category, each one carried a desire to be a facilitative leader. Why? Everyone had their own reason and the essence of it that I gathered is, that it makes one feel well to be able to enable one's team to perform optimally and in cohesion, a team that flows, where each one feels invested and motivated to work together towards a common goal. It is every leader's dream to lead a cohesive performing happy team. It feels like a superpower, and it is!

Now does facilitative leadership guarantee this type of dream teamwork? There is no guarantee of getting the exact same results with any type of approach – quantum physicists would argue this is just how the universe functions, more randomly than we care to acknowledge. That said, there is a much higher possibility of achieving this type of teamwork with this leadership style, other than perhaps the transformational leadership style. This is because a fundamental human need is to 'feel heard, acknowledged, included and valued' and when that is addressed, we become the best version of ourselves. This approach does not take

shortcuts on this – in fact, these are key values of this approach.

Fran Rees in her book *The Facilitator Excellence Handbook: Helping People Work Creatively and Productively Together* writes, 'Managers and others who adopt facilitative leadership blend their "role of visionary decisive leader with that of listening and empowering leader.' She continues 'In contrast with other leadership styles, such as paternalistic leadership or charismatic leadership, facilitative leadership involves the team as much as possible in creating the group's vision and purpose, carrying out the vision and purpose, and building a productive and cohesive team.' This emphasis on collaboration between the leader and the team is integral to facilitative leadership. Roger Schwarz in his book *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches* says 'anyone in an organization can practice facilitative leadership, regardless of their rank or level of responsibility'.

Why do we struggle with the facilitative approach?

My understanding from having adopted this style of working as well as having worked with others in their learning of this style of leadership is this - we struggle with being a facilitative leader because;

- a. It feels very different from how we normally function; falling back to authority to get things done is a default mode for most of us.
- b. We lack the understanding of what it takes to be a facilitative leader and the possibilities it opens up for all because it is not the norm and not easily fathomable unless one is an acute observer of oneself and the human relationship dynamic.
- c. The skills that are needed to imbibe this leadership style are underdeveloped in us because we do not practice them enough thanks to our social conditioning - our assumptions and fears around them.

To the 1st point on authority, in an organisation, there are structures for decision-making which automatically bring in the element of authority. In the facilitative leadership approach authority has its place, however, it is not steeped in power or control.

To the 3rd point, the skills of listening, curiosity, being open to differences, valuing diversity, not knowing everything and being okay with it etc are attitudes and skills that are often numb in us. We have structured our society on the belief that we have to compete to survive, and these skills go against the essence of competition in a very primal sense – or at least we think so. Hence, we seldom practice them. However, if one takes a moment to pause and reflect one might see that these skills are very important even to compete, to compete well with integrity and a sense of well-being.

We also may have misunderstood Darwin's theory of 'survival of the fittest' to being authoritative making one 'fit'; even though he seems to have said that 'adaptability to change' makes one fit to navigate through uncertainties. All the above-said skills are key to being able to adapt to change; because at the core of adapting is an open mind that is not resistant to new, not resistant to learning.

Facilitating a learning mindset for one's team

Adapting to change needs an open mind that is not resistant to learning, growing, and evolving. For a leader to practice a facilitative approach, cultivating this open mind in oneself and modelling it for one's team is imperative and an intrinsic part of creating a culture where an open learning mind is fostered in individuals who are a part of that ecosystem.

One of the first steps toward an open-minded work culture that fosters co-learning and collective growth is, like we said before, a space that addresses the fundamental human needs of 'feeling heard, acknowledged, included and valued' - so that the team becomes the best version of themselves both individually and collectively as they together adapt to a VOCA world.

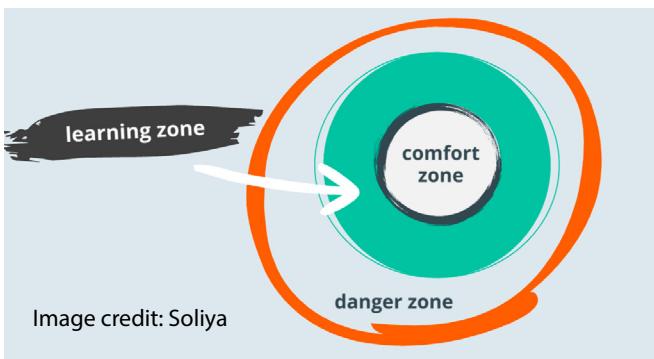
Learning happens in the right 'space'

In an environment where we feel unsafe i.e. judged or discounted, it is difficult to take in new information. We feel easily threatened, experience panic or anxiety and shut down.

Same in our comfort zone, when nothing challenges us learning doesn't happen. We do not feel motivated to take in new information and learn because we are just too comfortable.

The optimal space for learning to happen is

somewhere outside of our comfort zone, but away from our 'danger zone', the zone where one feels judged.



for individuals, the team and the organisation.

This space between the comfort zone and the danger zone is the 'learning zone'. A learning zone is where there is a basic feeling of safety that allows the discomfort of learning.

You know you are learning when you feel safe to experience some discomfort in the learning process.

Most learning entails some amount of discomfort for every one of us. When the team has this basic sense of safety, it allows for the **DISCOMFORT** that **provokes learning** for all.

This means that the team members express their honest thoughts and opinions and are open to exploring them collectively. They are also willing to share their own confusion when they are internally conflicted about how they think and feel. They are able to do that because they don't fear being judged, or discounted. They also feel safe enough and open to listen to each other – they listen to understand and engage, not to prove others wrong. In essence, as a team, they are able to discuss perspectives that they may not necessarily agree with or are uncomfortable with at the outset but are curious to learn more about.

When everyone in the team is able to practice this including the leader, they co-create trust, and creativity thrives. The clarity that emerges from such collaboration can often lead to a very holistic and nuanced understanding of topics, situations, objectives, and goals – apart from such collaboration reinforcing a positive work environment where people feel motivated and thrive. Decisions when made from such clarity and depth of understanding can lead to great results

A fundamental human need is to 'feel heard, acknowledged, included and valued' and when that is addressed, we become the best version of ourselves.

Reconnecting after a 15 - year Hiatus - Leveraging social capital through dormant ties

Dr. Smriti Walia
Senior Consultant, OD Alternatives



Ph.D. in Behavioral Economics, Smriti is dedicated to people and organizational development. As a social and behavioral change practitioner, Smriti is driven by a strong pursuit to bring behavioural insights into mainstream practices, aligning workers, workplaces, and work leading to high performance and a better work culture in the organizations. She is passionate about Social Capital, Leadership Development and creating Team effectiveness.

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Reconnecting after a 15 - year Hiatus - Leveraging social capital through dormant ties

Dr. Smriti Walia

Abstract: social capital is a priceless asset in our lives. By actively investing in relationships, nurturing shared experiences, and fostering open communication, we can leverage social capital for personal growth, professional advancement, and community betterment. Our connections with others hold immeasurable potential, reminding us that the bonds we create today can survive the test of time and shape our lives for years to come.

Meeting an old friend after 15 long years was an incredibly exhilarating and emotionally charged experience. The anticipation leading up to the reunion had been building for weeks, and finally, the day arrived. As I approached the agreed-upon meeting spot, memories of our shared childhood flooded my mind. We had spent countless hours together, exploring our neighbourhood, creating adventures, and dreaming about our futures. However, life's circumstances had pulled us apart, leading us on different paths.

With every step I took, my excitement grew, but so did a hint of nervousness. Would we still connect like we used to? Would there be awkwardness and unfamiliarity? Despite these fleeting doubts, I held onto the belief that true friendship transcends time and distance.

Upon entering the coffee shop, my eyes scanned the crowd until they landed on a figure seated at a corner table. As soon as our eyes met, a wave of recognition washed over us, and a shared smile of pure joy spread across our faces. It was as if the years melted away, and we were transported back to our carefree days of laughter and mischief. The moment we embraced, any uncertainties vanished. Warmth swept through me, permeating my entire being. We sat down, and the hours flew by in a whirlwind of stories, laughter, and heartfelt conversations. We caught up on missed milestones, those significant life events that had shaped us into the individuals we now were.

As we talked, it became evident that despite the physical separation, our connection had remained intact. We realized how much we had

unknowingly influenced each other's lives, our shared experiences leaving an indelible mark on our character. It was awe-inspiring to witness the progression of our dreams, witness the way life had unfolded for both of us. The conversation flowed with ease, reminiscent of long-forgotten inside jokes and shared references. But more importantly, we delved into the depths of our current selves, sharing our struggles, hopes, and dreams.

In that moment, it struck me that these connections, no matter how dormant, possess an astonishing potential. They store not just the shared history, but also the mutual understanding, empathy, and support we built during our fledgling years. Even though our paths diverged, it was the residue of this social capital that carried us along parallel journeys, nurturing us separately until the day our roads reconverged.

Understanding Social Capital

Social capital encompasses the resources and benefits derived from social relationships and networks. As the name suggests, it refers to the value embedded within our networks of relationships. While we often hear about leveraging resources or financial capital, we underestimate the immense power our connections hold. We tend to overlook the potential that lies buried within these deep-rooted friendships, merely thinking of them as distant memories.

Our conversation sparked a profound realization:

"...the true value of our social capital lies in leveraging it consciously to enhance our lives..."

Over all these years, our lives had evolved separately, acquiring new experiences, skills, knowledge, and connections. When we reconnect with old friends, we tap into a treasure trove of diverse perspectives and expertise, unveiling fresh insights and openings we might have otherwise overlooked.

By nurturing these rekindled relationships, we can create a virtuous cycle, expanding our social capital further. Our friends hold their own unique networks, introducing us to a myriad of individuals and communities whose interests and aspirations could align seamlessly with our own. Through this process, our connections become a gateway to limitless opportunities, forging new paths in our personal and professional lives.

Leveraging Social Capital

Leveraging social capital entails utilizing the power of our interpersonal connections to nurture personal growth, seize professional opportunities, and strengthen communities. Our social capital is built on the trust and reciprocity we share with others, and by intentionally cultivating strong relationships, we can tap into the vast resources and support network that it provides.



1. Personal Growth and Support: One of the key benefits of leveraging social capital is personal growth and support. Our relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds and expertise offer us a wealth of knowledge and guidance. By actively engaging with our networks and sharing our experiences, we can gain valuable insights and perspectives that broaden our understanding of different perspectives. Seeking advice and feedback from our connections can help us make informed decisions and navigate through challenges. The support we receive from

our social capital can be invaluable in our personal growth journey, propelling us toward success and fulfillment.

2. Professional Opportunities: Leveraging social capital also opens doors to numerous professional opportunities. Our connections can connect us with potential job leads, introduce us to influential figures in our fields, and provide mentorship and guidance for career advancement. In today's fiercely competitive job market, having a strong social capital can give us a significant advantage. It allows us access to opportunities that may otherwise remain out of reach, and recommendations from trusted connections can carry substantial weight in the decision-making process. By actively leveraging our social capital, we increase our chances of finding meaningful work, advancing in our careers, and realizing our professional aspirations.

3. Strengthening Communities: Social capital plays a crucial role in strengthening communities. When we come together and form networks, we pool our resources, skills, and expertise to address social issues and create positive change. Leveraging social capital can empower marginalized groups and promote inclusivity, as individuals with shared goals and values rally together to address common challenges. By leveraging social capital, we can bridge gaps and build bridges, creating a sense of belonging and unity within communities. The collective power of social capital has the potential to drive transformative change on both small-scale and societal levels, making it a vital tool in building vibrant and thriving communities.

By intentionally nurturing and strengthening our relationships, we gain access to a wealth of knowledge, support, and opportunities. Utilizing the power of social capital, we can navigate through challenges, expand our horizons, and contribute to positive change in our communities. As we recognize the value and potential of our connections,

leveraging social capital becomes not only a means to personal and professional success but also a pathway to a more inclusive and thriving society.

Back to my long-lost, and found friend...

As we reminisced about shared experiences and caught up on our lives, I realized the magnitude of social capital in maintaining long-term connections. Despite the physical distance that had separated us for years, our social capital had remained intact, bridging the gap between our last encounter and our recent reunion.

So how do I leverage the social capital that we had built in the first place, traces of which were still clearly seen through our reunion?

1. Trust and Reliability: Social capital flourishes when built on trust and reliability. In long-lasting relationships, mutual trust serves as a foundation, enabling both parties to rely on each other for support, assistance, and advice. Trust facilitated our ability to reconnect after so many years, rekindling the bond we had forged in the past.

2. Reciprocity: Reciprocity helps in balancing the power dynamics when it comes to leveraging social capital. It refers to the exchange of mutual benefits, support, and favours between individuals within a relationship. By engaging in reciprocal acts, you foster a deeper emotional connection and create a space where both parties feel valued and understood.

3. Shared Experiences and Memories: Strong social capital is often built on shared experiences and memories. These common threads weave together a deep sense of belonging, fostering connections that prevail through time and distance. Remembering cherished moments is a powerful tool for reigniting friendships that have stood the test of time.

4. Open Communication: Effective communication is pivotal in maintaining and leveraging one's social capital. The ability to openly express ourselves, share our joys, and confide in each other strengthens the social fabric that binds us. A willingness to listen and empathize is equally crucial in cultivating deeper connections.

5. Emotional Support: Enhancing lifetime relationships requires an understanding and willingness to provide emotional support.

Being there for each other during challenging times, offering a shoulder to lean on, and providing encouragement fosters a sense of security and belonging. Emotional support strengthens bonds and creates a safe space for vulnerability, further strengthening social capital.

6. Mutual Respect: Respecting one another's individuality and autonomy is essential in enhancing lifetime relationships. Recognizing and appreciating each other's unique qualities, opinions, and perspectives creates a respectful and inclusive environment. When individuals feel valued and respected, they are more likely to invest in the relationship, leading to stronger social capital.

7. Adaptability: Life is ever-evolving, and relationships must adapt to change and growth. Enhancing lifetime relationships necessitates flexibility and adaptability, as individuals navigate different life stages, circumstances, and priorities. Remaining open to new experiences, embracing change, and supporting each other's personal development contribute to a dynamic and enduring relationship.

8. Forgiveness and Resilience: No relationship is immune to conflicts and challenges. Enhancing lifetime relationships requires forgiveness and resilience. Being able to forgive, move past disagreements, and learn from mistakes cultivates trust and demonstrates a commitment to the relationship. Resilience allows individuals to weather tough times together, emerging stronger and more connected.

Reuniting with my dear friend after nearly 15 years underscored the power of social capital. As I reflected on our journey and the value of lasting connections, it became clear that social capital is a priceless asset in our lives. By actively investing in relationships, nurturing shared experiences, and fostering open communication, we can leverage social capital for personal growth, professional advancement, and community betterment.

Our connections with others hold immeasurable potential, reminding us that the bonds we create today can survive the test of time and shape our lives for years to come.

Women Leadership Summit – 2023

Hridi Kukreja

Partner at OD Alternatives

Partner at ODA, boasts a wealth of diverse work experience spanning corporate and social sectors, accumulating nearly two decades of invaluable expertise. She blends her psychology background and organizational development expertise to provide leadership and employee development interventions, culture building, assessments/coaching. She has led DEAL awareness/promotion, Gender Sensitization& Mainstreaming interventions & audits for organizations across industries.

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Women Leadership Summit – 2023

Hridi Kukreja

"Empower a woman, and you empower a community. Empower a community, and you empower the world." - Greg Allgood

What Greg Allgood said in context of community can also be well taken in context of empowering women at work and in return that leading to more empowered organizations.

For close to a decade now, ODA has consistently developed unique programs and initiatives to develop strong leaders and inclusive cultures in organizations that led to more engagement and growth and development. **ODA's Women Leadership Summit - TrailblazHer 2023** was yet another initiative that brought together thought leaders, experts, and professionals from diverse backgrounds to discuss and inspire progress in the realm of women's leadership.

With a lineup of 13 influential speakers, the event delved into a wide range of topics, providing valuable insights and empowering messages. We try and summarize here the key takeaways and highlights from the four impactful sessions held from September 25th to September 28th, 2023, which saw attendance of close to 450 attendees across the sessions belonging to diverse organizations and vocations.

Our eminent speakers from various backgrounds generously shared their personal journeys, experiences, and wisdom on how women can develop, thrive, and lead, both in society and organizations. Here are the Day 1 to Day 4 Highlights

Day 1 - Topic – Towards a more equitable world -how far are we and what we can do?

ODA Founder - Santosh Babu kick-started the event leading the discussion to get our speakers to shed light on our current position in terms

of societal equity, cultural standing, and our individual perceptions of gender equality and equity. **We had eminent leaders from their fields as guest speakers -**

Ms. Gangapriya Chakraverti Ford Business Solutions, India

Ms Chaitali Mukherjee, Partner McKinsey & Company India

Ms Anjali Menon, Filmmaker & Co-Founder Women in Cinema Collective, India

The speakers shared valuable insights from their personal experiences and discussed strategies to drive positive change in our society. The audience was engaged throughout as each of the speaker shared their own remarkable journey, detailing their own experiences and struggle in overcoming age-old myths, biases, limiting beliefs. Their stories also highlighted how they persevered and influenced change in their eco-systems.

Day 2 - Topic - Building equitable workplaces – Challenges and Opportunities

Moving from the larger landscape to our immediate work landscape, this session talked about current challenges and opportunities and was moderated by ODA partner Hridi Kukreja. **We had a line-up of diverse and distinguished guest speakers -**

Ms Charu Menon – MD, Heckler, Singapore

Ms Ankur Chopra – Head HR, IFC, World Bank Group South Asia

Mr Harish Sadani – Co-Founder & Director, Men Against Violence & abuse

In the session we delved into the complexities of achieving workplace equity, drawing from real-life examples found in the media, from subtle everyday instances of sexism to the self-limiting biases in women. The speakers explored the myriad challenges and promising opportunities that lie ahead in the pursuit of fair and inclusive

professional environments. This session shed light on the ongoing efforts needed to create workplaces where diversity thrives, and everyone has an equal chance to excel.

Day 3 – Topic - Inclusive Leadership -Who Needs to be Empowered?

The 3rd day was an engaging panel discussion moderated by Shipra Garg with a panel of well-known and established leaders from across industries and backgrounds. On the panel we had -

Ms Meenakshi Ganju – head of Operations , Worley , India

Ms Annie Zaidi – Award Winning author , Playwright-India

Mr Augustus Azariah – HR Leader, Kyndryl , India

Mr Amit Patel – Group Head & HR & EHS ZF Group India

The session on “Inclusive Leadership - Who Needs to be Empowered?” brought forth a profound discussion on the pivotal role of inclusive leadership in today’s world. Guest speakers shared insights on the importance of empowering not just individuals but entire organizations to foster inclusivity. They emphasized that it’s a collective effort, from leaders to employees, to create a more equitable and diverse workplace. This session highlighted the significance of inclusive leadership as a catalyst for positive change and progress.

Day 4 – Insights and Learnings – The story of my leadership journey

The closing session of the summit on Day 4, provided a remarkable conclusion to the event. Moderated by Sushmita Usha Devarajan -Associate partner at ODA , the session had a well-experienced leaders and learned guests from diverse backgrounds.

Ms Jil Mathew -Business Transformation Leader, IBM India & USA

Ms Hema Swaminathan – Professor _centre of Public Policy , IIM Bangalore , India

Ms Shilpa Revankar , co-Founder & Director Zyeta , 2gether

The speakers shared their personal leadership narratives, offering invaluable insights and a

wealth of wisdom to inspire and guide future leaders on their unique journeys. This session encapsulated the essence of the summit, emphasizing the power of individual stories and experiences in shaping the future of leadership.

Key takeaways of the sessions-

I. Empowering with Self-Confidence - Throughout the event, the significance of women cultivating self-confidence and conquering self-doubt emerged as a recurring and empowering theme. It was made abundantly clear that believing in ourselves constitutes the crucial initial stride toward realizing our aspirations. The speakers emphasized that self-confidence is not just a personal attribute but a catalyst for breaking barriers and achieving remarkable success.

You don't need a lot of stereotypes associated to leadership, like you need to be assertive or dominating or have a loud voice , you just need to know how to be firm and not apologize to have a voice What helps is more conversations, it is about more awareness , like they say - it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease '



Ms.Charu Menon –
MD, Heckler, Singapore

Believe in yourself. Things might be difficult but keep moving. You don't have to keep proving to everyone how good you are. It might take time but your work will talk for you. So keep moving.



Meenakshi Ganju
Head of operations(Hyd),
Worley, india

Build your support system, work as a team with your spouse to manage home - do not take on everything, be equal partners and share home responsibilities. And don't forget - pause from time to time, think about your place in the world, find your connection and own it with conviction.



Ms Hema Swaminathan –
Professor _centre of Public Policy ,
IIM Bangalore , India

You are the one who possesses the key, have an attitude to challenge yourself and prove to yourself and others what you can achieve. No one needs to set a mark or limit for you, you are free to do it for yourself.



Ms Ankur Chopra –

Head HR, IFC,
World Bank Group South Asia

Women have to prepare to the last bit of detail in a client negotiation, while that is not the case for a man. Women literally have to break the concrete ceiling every step of their way, it is exhausting; also exhilarating when one is able to do it, but one shouldn't have to!



Ms Shilpa Revankar,

Co-Founder & Director Zyeta ,
2gether

This resonated even with ODA's Women Leadership Research report conducted just released before Covid, where **CONFIDENCE AND CONVICTION** were highlighted as critical elements for success through a qualitative response analysis of 112 participants.

II. Confronting Unconscious Bias – Unconscious biases – this was quoted as the number one derailer of creating equity and inclusion as well as psychologically safe workplaces. The implicit/unconscious biases continue to limit not only men but women as well. Awareness, training and proactive measures are necessary to eliminate these biases and pave way for a more inclusive environment and work culture.

During the audience poll 80% of the participants selected unconscious bias as the no 1 reason barrier to gender equity at workplaces highlighting its prevalence and infact saying it is a precursor for other challenges such as inclusive policies, gender pay gap or limited access to leadership opportunities. This data underscores the critical need to address unconscious biases at all levels including leadership, as a primary source in our journey towards workplace gender equality.

My reading of the situation is that it has very little to do with the mechanism or the models ,it has got to do with individuals or managers, who are well meaning but I have very strongly felt that if you work with unconscious biases and you help people realise what you are doing and how it is impacting , inclusion , diversity and hence business output - it can go long way.



Ms Chaitali Mukherjee,
Partner M McKinsey &
Company India

III. Equitable Organizations Invest in Marginalized Groups – Equitable organizations don't just go by number metrics; they invest in creating equity for groups that are marginalized. To ensure there is a healthy succession pipeline and women do get to the positions of leadership, it is imperative organizations invest in women development programmes that provide opportunities of upskilling and self-development.

It is important for organizations to think about training programs that will enforce to women employees their worth, their capability, their fitness to take on additional responsibilities and inject them with the confidence that they need to move into senior positions. I have found speaking to many women , who are on the cusp of taking up senior leadership position , that their biggest derailer is confidence and self- doubt. Programs are needed to make them realise what their true worth is, how their life can change and what levers they have in their toolkit that they can use, as they grow in the organization.



Ms. Gangapriya Chakraverti,
Ford Business Solutions, India

Don't make assumptions and decisions based on what you think someone needs, because of their gender. Give that role they deserve, let them have the agency to make decisions for themselves, let them ask for support that they need.



Ms Jil Mathew -
Business Transformation Leader,
IBM India & USA

In another poll, the audience was posed with the question: "Do you believe that women encounter distinctive obstacles when negotiating for promotions and salary raises?" Nearly 70% of the audience concurred. This consensus underlines the pressing need to dismantle deep-rooted attitudes and limitations that have persisted over time. To accomplish this, it is essential to focus on skill enhancement and personal development.

While women must forge ahead with unwavering determination, the organizations must take active steps as well, to establish mentorship and sponsorship programs aimed at fostering gender inclusivity and advancement.

IV. Inclusivity Through Equal Engagement of both sides- Building true equity and equality requires the active involvement of men in the conversation. We discovered that real progress happens when all genders unite in pursuit of a more inclusive world. If women need to be enabled, men too need to be involved, enabled and engaged especially as leaders and then peers and partners.

Men are able to understand that the traditional idea of masculinity and pressure to perform from bedroom to boardroom, and how it impacts their health and being. We need to widen their horizon and provide them safe spaces where they can understand the privilege and entitlements they have enjoyed and instead of labelling them provide to men as well, safe and non-threatening spaces to evolve.



Mr Harish Sadani –
Co-Founder & Director,
Men Against Violence & abuse

The less privileged groups are swimming against the current, so even to remain the water it is an incredible struggle . So that social current of unconscious bias is what we are all up against and its high time its acknowledged and recognized and every body is made a stakeholder in that growth, not just women.



Ms Anjali Menon,
Filmmaker & Co-Founder Women
in Cinema Collective, India

The role of genders and our perceptions need to be reflected, examined and needs constant conversations which provide opportunity for reflection and mindset shifts are critical .

V. Diversity is a Necessity – It was reaffirmed through personal shares, organizational case examples and even anecdotes that diversity is not just a moral imperative but a practical necessity. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us that diverse skills and not the oft associated masculine leadership traits such as ambition, drive et al that are essential to meet modern challenges. Skills traditionally labelled "feminine" are equally crucial.

Organizations have recognized the need for diversity, however we need to bring in efforts and invest in creating gender mainstreaming at all levels.

VI. The Path to Sustainable Inclusion – The achieve true inclusion organizations need to have a systemic approach and **must view DEI as a business agenda and not just an HR or even PR initiative.** Capacity building, mindset shift and inclusive leadership programs, creation of supportive policies & process and investing in inclusive infrastructures are vital steps towards genuine inclusion.

It is not mere Tokenism that will create the desired shift , we must delve deeper in our approach. Infact Infact as Charu shared , this led her to be a part of an initiative led by a called by producer group was called "fuck the cupcakes" because there are so many tokenistic initiatives where we merely go through the motions , pretend to do things but

just end up having cupcakes and tea and they decided we needed more than tokenism. **Substantive changes need to move beyond symbolism for organizations to drive authentic change.**

DEAI councils , mentorship and sponsorship programs are very powerful tools; these are transformative programs for organizations along with having a culture of open dialogue to break the barriers and pave the way for equal workplaces.

Ms Ankur Chopra –

*Head HR, IFC,
World Bank Group South Asia*

If the purpose of leadership is to direct and shape how a group will develop, it is imperative to challenge the scope of such leadership. After all, can those who are blinkered lead anyone on uncharted pathways? Development, whether it is of company sales, or a nation's wellbeing, requires a diverse set of skills and this is only possible in an environment of safety and inclusiveness. Anyone who seeks prosperity must commit themselves to such values of diversity and inclusion.



*Annie Zaidi,
Award winning author,
Playwright, India*

*" In the early 2000's we had a target to meet on women hires, there was a quota to fulfil, that was relentless pursued and achieved every year by the TA team, after a few years we realised that pursuing a Quota was not sustainable, but we need to build a Culture. To make diversity, equity, and inclusion part of an organization's DNA , it's about creating an environment where everyone feels valued and respected, and where diversity is seen as a strength. This cultural transformation requires time, effort, and a genuine commitment from all stakeholders to bring about lasting change, but that is a change I have journeyed!!.
Therefore. Quota to Culture"*



*Augustus Azariah,
Human Resource Leader
Kyndryl, India*

Adaptability, Agility, Grit, multi-tasking, Caring, empathetic, Joyful,, these are just a few attributes that women demonstrate "not just at work" but beyond their working hours. We need these Attributes more so at workplace to make our office environment inclusive, caring, high- performance driven, and lively. And by creating such environment organizations stands to gain huge competitive advantage in attracting, engaging, and retaining talent. I have always witnessed in my two decades of career on women bringing these traits at workplace and subtly teaching us how it can be done.



*Amit Patil,
Group head HR & EHS
ZF Group, India*

The TrailblazHer Women Leadership Conference provided invaluable insights and a roadmap for continued progress in the pursuit of equity, inclusion, and diverse leadership. We look forward to applying these learnings and working together to build a brighter, more equitable future.

And would like to conclude with this strong imagery that was created by the audience answers in response to the final poll on DAY . We asked - What is the one thing as per you that can promote women empowerment at workplaces?



As we enter the new year of 2024,
we are excited to announce the launch of

Open Enrollment Online Programs

These programs have been carefully developed based on our extensive experience and expertise in the leadership space, which spans nearly three decades. We have identified key areas that are highly relevant in today's corporate context, ensuring that our programs address the most pressing needs of professionals and organizations.

Our Open Enrollment Online Programs provide a flexible and accessible learning experience, allowing participants to enhance their leadership skills and stay ahead in their careers, all from the convenience of their own devices. We are thrilled to offer these programs and look forward to empowering individuals and driving organizational success in the year ahead.

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30 hour - Online - Jan to Feb 2024



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Strategies for cultivating and leveraging meaningful connections at the workplace

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