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T-R-E-A-T LEADERSHIP FOR NEW-AGE ORGANISATIONS

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The world of business today is far more complex and unpredictable than it was a few years ago. Nine out of ten Indian companies have experienced disruption in the recent past.¹ Change and complexity are not new to organisations. However, what makes the present moment unique in human history is the convergence of the maturing of several technologies that had so far developed independently. The pace of change has multiplied manifold and scientists have predicted that the technological advancements of the 100 years of the 21st century will be more than the advancements made by humanity in the last 20,000 years.²

The advancement of technology and market economy is characterised by the emergence of new-age organisations that are knowledge-driven, and where employees are constantly engaged in knowledge work. Knowledge work is defined as anything where the acquisition and exploitation of knowledge is central for an organisation's competitive advantage. Knowledge workers today can be found everywhere - programmers, healthcare professionals, pharmacists, academics, scientists, engineers, lawyers, architects, consultants, management practitioners, business and financial operators, arts, design, entertainment and sports - and any other work where people 'think for a living'.

Knowledge workers usually have distinct goal orientations, values, need structures and behavioural patterns. Their tasks usually involve a high risk of failure and frequently experience disruptions, delays, and setbacks. The self-image of these employees is usually that of a workforce that makes things work, avoids waste of time, capital, and labour, and that is independent in thought and action.

Leadership is the *process of influencing* an individual or a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. The central task of management today is to blend powerful leadership with an empowered workforce (comprising knowledge workers), and providing them with clear goals and an open and participative culture. Based on research that I have carried out on knowledge

workers working in Indian R&D organisations, I have developed the *T-R-E-A-T leadership*³ framework that stands for a combination of task-orientation, relation-orientation, empowering, authenticity and team-building behaviours. I briefly describe the study as well as the leadership model below.

Research Study

The study was conducted in the R&D laboratories of CSIR, India's largest civilian research organisation. With 38 laboratories, more than 4,000 active scientists and about 8,000 scientific and technical personnel, CSIR is one of the world's largest collections of industrially oriented public research laboratories. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 52 CSIR scientists across 5 research laboratories. The analyses of the interview transcripts resulted in the development of the T-R-E-A-T leadership framework. The framework was further validated by collecting data from about 584 scientists working in 11 CSIR R&D laboratories.^{5,6}

T-R-E-A-T Leader Behaviours

Task-orientation

Task-orientation is primarily concerned with *accomplishing a task in an efficient manner*. Task-orientation includes the following four behaviours: clarifying, problem-solving, monitoring and buffering. Competent leaders use their technical competence to evaluate ideas and make selections from among them, walk a tightrope between over-control and too much autonomy, make subtle changes in priorities and sequences, and ensure professional challenge in the work. Task-orientation is a necessary-but-not-sufficient condition for ensuring the effectiveness of leaders of knowledge workers. The first condition for leaders to be successful in a knowledge work context is that they themselves must be knowledgeable about the work and should have a clear understanding of what the work is and how the challenges encountered at work should be overcome. They should have had experience of doing the work themselves.

Relation-orientation

Relation-orientation is primarily concerned with the *development of strong interpersonal relationships* with the subordinates and enhancing their well-being. The category comprises communicating, inspiring, supporting and recognising behaviours. The foundation of relation-orientation behaviour is open, two-way communication. The leaders need to communicate with their subordinates on a regular basis in order to listen to their voices and understand any work-related concerns that the subordinates may have, to inform the subordinates about the work-related development in their teams and also the organisation, to provide the subordinates any work-related information that may be useful, to recognise and appreciate the contributions subordinates are making, and lastly to inspire the subordinates by communicating the big-picture and emphasising the importance of the work.

Empowering

Empowering behaviour includes *consulting and delegating* behaviours. Involving subordinates in the decision-making process is likely to lead to better decisions as well as acceptance of those decisions. Consulting behaviour is about checking with subordinates before taking decisions that may affect their work, inviting suggestions for improvement of work, encouraging them to participate in decision-making process and then incorporating the ideas and suggestions of

subordinates in the decisions being taken. Related to this is the delegating behaviour that is about giving subordinates substantial responsibility and discretion in carrying out work activities, handling problems, and making important decisions.

Authenticity

Authenticity includes two behaviours, namely, *leading-by-example* and *authentic* behaviours. Leading-by-example is about setting high standards of behaviours at work, working hard and leading by example in terms of humility, integrity, courage, and hard work. Authenticity is about doing what you preach, doing what is right, having the courage to choose what is right over what is easy and fast, and most importantly practising values that you hold dear and that you encourage in others. Authenticity builds trust in relationships as the leader walks-the-talk and ensures that there is no difference between what is said and what is done. Leaders who stifle authenticity, lead to creation of toxic workplaces where there is an absence of trust and where overall well-being and happiness of subordinates are sacrificed.

Team-building

Converting ideas into products usually requires a team comprising members with complementary skills who work together in close proximity for long periods of time. While for high-achievers, it is often all about 'me', for good leaders, it is all about 'us'. Team-building behaviour comprises behaviours that facilitate the *constructive resolution of conflict* among team members, *encouraging cooperation* and teamwork, and *developing identification* with the work team. Leaders must create a *psychologically safe* team environment where members feel comfortable sharing their views and where team members are sensitive to the feelings of other members.⁷

T-R-E-A-T Leadership in Action: Satya Nadella at Microsoft

When Satya Nadella became the CEO of Microsoft in February 2014, Microsoft had a culture of infighting, politics and inertia. Employees competed against one another to prove that they were the best or the smartest. Hierarchy had trumpeted creativity and spontaneity.⁸ Demonstrating T-R-E-A-T leadership, Nadella transformed Microsoft's culture from a 'know-it-all' culture to a 'learn-it-all' culture where every person can change, learn, develop and grow. First, he provided a vision of focusing on the cloud business, a nascent business he had been working on since 2011, partnering with competing platforms such as Linux and Apple, and aggressively acquiring companies such as LinkedIn and Github.^{9,10} Changing the mindset at Microsoft, he encouraged employees at Microsoft to *fall in love* with lead indicators of success (i.e., usage) rather than revenues. Emphasizing the values of empathy, compassion and willingness to understand others' feelings, and showing the 'lead-by-example' behaviour by practicing it, he showed the importance of relation-orientation, authenticity and team-building. Colleagues at Microsoft mention that they have never seen Nadella get upset, raise his voice, or fire off an angry email. Shelley Bransten, a Microsoft corporate vice president observed what makes Nadella unique is that he has "no swagger" about him¹¹. Lastly, Nadella empowered his executives and engineers by giving them the freedom to work on platforms they liked. During a meeting with Microsoft employees, one employee asked him, "Why can't I print a document from my mobile phone?"¹² To that Nadella politely told him, "Make it happen. You have full authority." Nadella emphasized that the hallmark of cultural transformation at Microsoft will be based on individual empowerment.

T-R-E-A-T: A New Way of Thinking About Leadership

I call this model of leadership as the T-R-E-A-T leadership for two reasons. The first is that this model comprises five leader behaviours, namely, task-orientation, relation-orientation, empowering, authenticity and team-building behaviours. Leaders need to understand, develop and display all of these behaviours in order to inspire performance from knowledge-workers. Also, these behaviours have synergistic effects with each other and reinforce their impacts on the subordinates. The second reason is that when leaders display such behaviours, the subordinates (employees) feel that they have been treated well by their leaders. Such leadership is a treat to watch and when displayed is likely to produce great results.

T-R-E-A-T leadership framework can be of immense help to practitioners who often wrestle with the task of identifying appropriate behaviours that can ensure leader effectiveness in new-age work contexts that are driven by knowledge work. These behaviours can be incorporated into the leadership training modules of knowledge-based organisations and the leaders of knowledge workers can be made aware of the type of behaviours that can sustain and even enhance employee creativity and creative performance. Also, the T-R-E-A-T leader behaviours can be used as a metric to judge the suitability of leaders for knowledge-work context. Leaders who exhibit or deploy such behaviours while managing knowledge workers may have a higher chance of producing better results.

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