



WHEN BRAND ISN'T REALLY BRAND ANYMORE

INSIDE

- The Why's of Data
- Micro-Mentorship
- Transformational Empowerment
- Hustle or Hibernate



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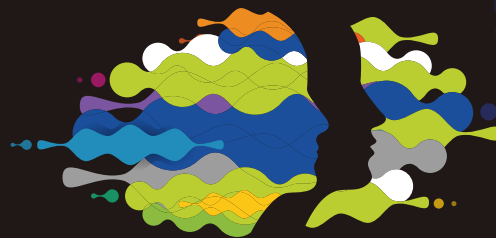
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CEO LOUNGE



From the shifts in learning habits to the cross-pollination of business models, this edition takes you into the undercurrents that shape how we work, buy, learn, and lead.

EVERY EDITION begins as a question. What are we really noticing? What are we not saying out loud? What are we beginning to sense but haven't yet defined?

This month's edition moves across that in-between space where trends are still fluid, and conversations haven't yet hardened into frameworks. More than a collection of answers, it's like a set of open tabs in the browser of your mind, pieces that you keep returning to, lines that unsettle and ideas that reframe. From the shifts in learning habits to the cross-pollination of business models, this edition takes you into the undercurrents that shape how we work, buy, learn, and lead.

And in a world increasingly obsessed with immediacy, perhaps the act of reading itself becomes a form of strategic patience, where you linger on what matters instead of chasing what's next.

Read slowly. Think longer.

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Whether it's the way algorithms shape decision-making or how legacy systems quietly influence talent flow, each piece challenges the idea that we already know what's going on.

SOME EDITIONS lean into big themes. Others pull back the curtain on patterns we've normalised without noticing. This one does a bit of both.

You'll find stories that force you to re-examine the very assumptions that usually go unquestioned. Whether it's the way algorithms shape decision-making or how legacy systems quietly influence talent flow, each piece challenges the idea that we already know what's going on. That's the point. The real signals rarely shout, they whisper.

You'll also notice something else. There's a certain tension running through this edition. A sense that we're collectively standing in a hallway between two rooms: one that's familiar but fading, and another that hasn't fully taken shape yet.

This is the space Xplore thrives in. Where old labels feel too small, but the new ones haven't been coined yet.

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EDITOR'S MUSINGS

THERE ARE moments when everything feels noisy. Too many opinions, too many predictions, and too little pause. And then, just occasionally, an edition like this comes along, one that doesn't try to shout above the noise, but instead, clears a bit of space for clarity.

This month, that space comes in the form of questions. Real ones. Not the rhetorical kind, but the type that compel you to stop scrolling and actually think. What are the trade-offs we've grown too comfortable with? How much of what we call innovation is just replication at scale? Have we mistaken busyness for progress?

The content here holds your attention because it speaks to that rare place between instinct and insight. The essays observe without imposing. The interviews reveal without romanticising. And even the smallest fragments, one line here, one phrase there, might linger longer than you expect.

We're not chasing newness for the sake of it. We're examining what's shifting underneath the surface. The systems that enable, the behaviours that repeat, the ideas that quietly shape outcomes.

This is a vantage point. And if you find yourself re-reading something later this month, that's not an accident. That's the work doing what it's meant to do.

Hari Govind Nair

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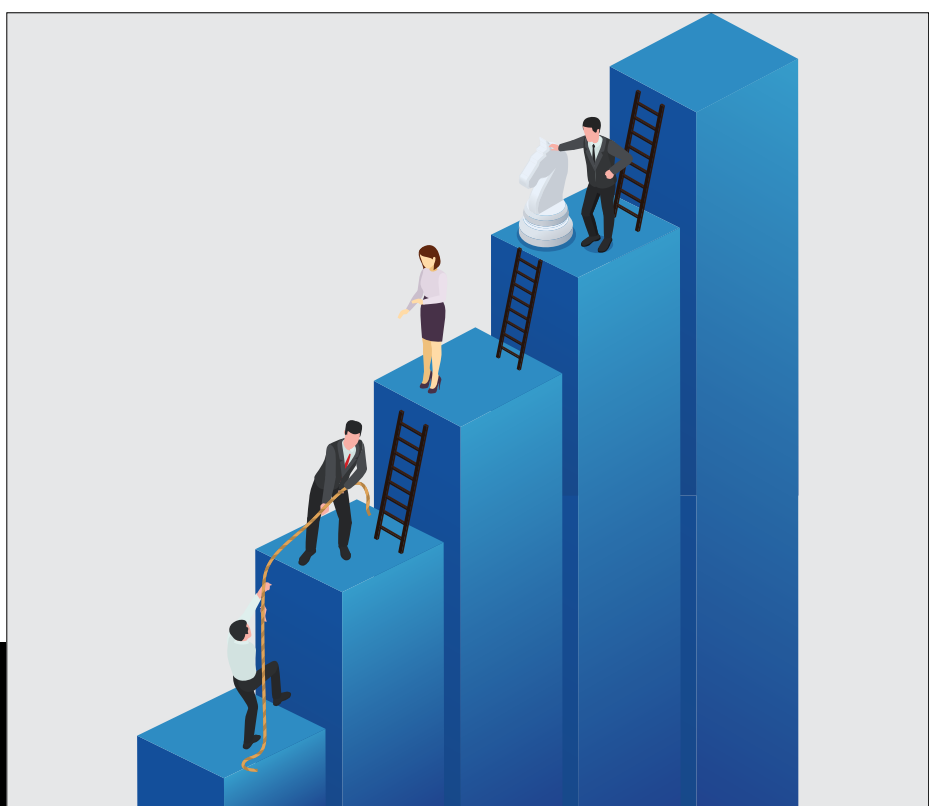
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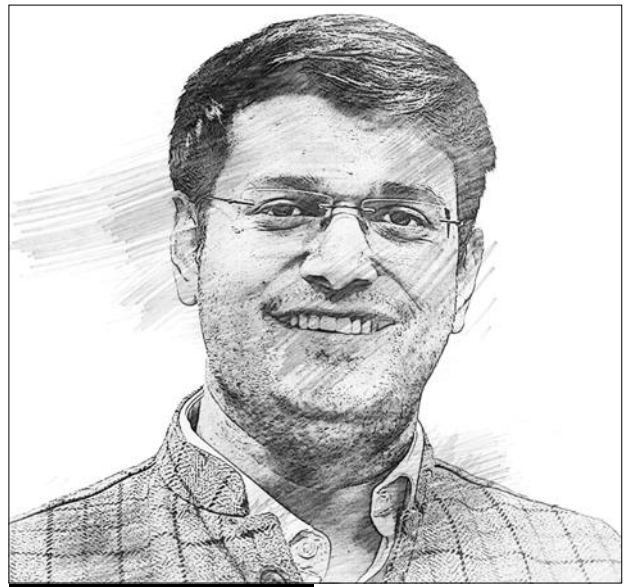




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WHAT'S Inside

Empower to Transform Leading Through Change

As change reshapes the workplace, transformative leaders empower teams not just to cope but to question, reimagine, and emerge stronger together

 by Gnyanashri Chenna



Back in 1995, John Kotter came up with his eight-step model for leading change. One step that really made me pause was Step 6: *Empower Employees*. At first, it felt odd. I mean, aren't employees supposed to follow the rules, stick to company culture, and just get the job done? Why go the extra mile to empower them — especially during something as uncertain as change?

But then I thought about today's world. With AI changing how we work, we don't just need people to input data — we need them to think, question, analyse, and improve it. We're asking more of them, and so it only makes sense that we give more in return. That's exactly where transformative leadership comes in.

Steady as a Mother's Hand

To me, a transformative leader is like a mother to her child. She doesn't just feed the child or make sure they study — she believes in them. She sees their potential, even when they can't. She picks them up when they fall, motivates them, and slowly helps them find their feet. Just like puberty is a given for a child, change is inevitable for an organisation.

But while a child's growth is expected, an organisation's sudden downturn often isn't. Some changes are small; some are massive. Some help the company grow; others feel like they're tearing it apart. Through it all, the leader is that steady hand, helping the team keep its spirit alive — even when it feels like the training wheels are coming off too soon.

The Pillars of Transformative Leadership

Bernard Bass, the psychologist behind groundbreaking research on inspirational leadership, talks about three key pillars of transformative leadership, and they really make sense when you see them play out in real life.

First is *Idealised Influence* — *charisma*. Not the flashy, movie-star kind, but the kind that builds trust, inspires, and makes people feel like they're part of something bigger. Think of a company in crisis. A typical transactional leader would lay out



We're asking employees to think, question and improve — so it only makes sense we empower them to do just that

targets, assign tasks, and expect everyone to fall in line. But now imagine a leader like Mr Das. He gathers his team, explains the situation honestly, listens to their concerns, and leads with empathy. He's not just task-oriented or people-oriented — he's both. His team doesn't just work for him; they work *with* him. And in return, they give it their all.

Second, there's *Intellectual Stimulation*. This is about encouraging people to think differently, to challenge the usual way of doing things. Picture a merger happening — everyone's overwhelmed, frustrated, unsure of what the future looks like. While most teams complain about new processes or who's getting more work-from-home

days, Mr Das's team is busy questioning the old ways, reimagining how things could be better, not just for themselves, but for the whole company. That mindset shift? It's the leader's doing.

Finally, there's *Individualised Consideration*. This one's simple — genuinely caring about your people. Mr Das knows his team. Not just their names or designations, but their strengths, their struggles, their potential. He checks in with them, gives thoughtful feedback, and celebrates the small wins. Sure, he takes them out for dinner or invites them home now and then — but more than that, he invests time in their growth. And that personal attention? It sticks. It makes people feel seen and valued.

In the end, it's like this: just as a mother plays a huge role in shaping who her child becomes, a leader can shape the course of a team — or even an entire organisation. They can choose to merely ride out the wave of change, or they can lead their team through it and come out stronger. And if they choose the latter, empowering their people isn't just a good step — it's the only way forward. ◀



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The Micro-Mentorship Advantage

Mentoring Made for a Busy World

Discover how micro-mentorship offers just-in-time guidance — helping professionals climb higher through short, focused exchanges that drive real-world impact

 by Madhura Kuthe



In the dynamic world of modern business, mentorship remains a critical component of personal and professional development. Traditionally, mentorship is perceived as a long-term, structured relationship, often requiring significant time commitments. However, a new, more flexible approach — known as micro-mentorship — is gaining traction. Micro-mentorship involves short, focused interactions that provide immediate guidance and support. This article explores the benefits of micro-mentorship, its implementation, and how it can drive growth for both individuals and organisations.

What is Micro-Mentorship?

Micro-mentorship is characterised by brief, goal-oriented interactions between mentors and mentees. These sessions can occur through various mediums, such as quick meetings, phone calls, emails or instant messaging. Unlike traditional mentorship, which typically involves

ongoing, long-term engagement, micro-mentorship focuses on addressing specific issues or questions in real time, allowing for more immediate and targeted support.

The Benefits of Micro-Mentorship

Flexibility and accessibility: One of the most significant advantages of micro-mentorship is its flexibility. Busy professionals often struggle to find time for regular, long-term mentoring sessions. Micro-mentorship offers a solution by allowing both mentors and mentees to engage in brief yet impactful interactions that fit seamlessly into their schedules. This flexibility makes mentorship more accessible to a wider range of individuals, including those who may not have the capacity for traditional mentoring relationships.

Immediate impact: Micro-mentorship can have an immediate impact by addressing specific, real-time challenges faced by the mentee. Whether it is providing feedback

Micro-mentorship enables swift, purpose-driven support — bridging the gap between need and action in the flow of everyday work



By removing time constraints, micro-mentorship makes mentoring accessible to more people – without compromising on relevance, depth or developmental value

on a presentation, offering advice on a project or discussing career development, these focused interactions allow mentees to quickly apply the guidance they receive. This immediacy can lead to rapid improvements and tangible results, enhancing the mentee's performance and confidence.

Diverse perspectives: Another benefit of micro-mentorship is the ability to seek advice from multiple mentors with different areas of expertise and perspectives. This approach allows mentees to gain a well-rounded understanding of various subjects and challenges. For example, an entrepreneur might seek micro-mentorship from a marketing expert for branding advice and a financial adviser for budgeting tips. This diversity enriches the mentee's learning experience and provides comprehensive support.

Continuous learning: Micro-mentorship encourages a culture of continuous learning and development. Regular, small doses of guidance can help mentees stay motivated and focused on their goals. These ongoing interactions can also foster a habit of seeking feedback and improvement, which is

crucial for personal and professional growth.

Networking opportunities: Each micro-mentorship session presents an opportunity to connect with industry experts and leaders. These interactions can help mentees expand their professional network, opening doors to new opportunities, collaborations and insights. Building a robust network is essential for career advancement and staying informed about industry trends.

Implementing Micro-Mentorship Programmes

Identifying clear goals: For micro-mentorship to be effective, both mentors and mentees must identify clear goals for each interaction. Whether it is seeking advice on a specific project, gaining feedback on work or discussing career development, having a clear objective ensures that the session is productive and focused.

Leveraging technology: Technology plays a crucial role in facilitating micro-mentorship. Video calls, messaging apps and online platforms make it easy for mentors and mentees to connect and communicate, regardless of geographic location. Leveraging these tools can enhance the efficiency and accessibility of micro-mentorship interactions.

Fostering a mentorship culture: Creating a culture that values and supports mentorship is vital for the success of micro-mentorship programmes. Organisations should encourage employees to seek out micro-mentorship opportunities and recognise the contributions of mentors. Promoting a mentorship culture can also involve providing resources and training to help mentors and mentees make the most of their interactions.

Providing resources: Offering resources and training can enhance the effectiveness of micro-mentorship. Guidelines on effective communication, goal-setting and feedback can help mentors and mentees navigate their interactions successfully. Organisations might also provide templates for mentorship agreements, checklists and discussion prompts to facilitate productive sessions.

Evaluating and iterating: Regularly evaluating the effectiveness of micro-





Multiple mentors with diverse expertise help mentees gain well-rounded insights, making learning more dynamic, contextual and immediately applicable

mentorship programmes is essential for continuous improvement. Gathering feedback from participants can help identify areas for enhancement and celebrate successes. Organisations should be open to making adjustments based on this feedback to ensure that the programme meets the needs of both mentors and mentees.

Case Study: Google's Micro-Mentorship Initiative

Google's "Googler-to-Googler" (G2G) programme exemplifies the successful implementation of micro-mentorship. The G2G programme encourages employees to offer and seek mentorship on a variety of topics, ranging from technical skills to career development. These interactions are often short and focused, allowing employees to gain valuable insights and support without a long-term commitment.

The flexibility and accessibility of the G2G programme have made it a popular and effective tool for employee development at Google. By leveraging the diverse expertise within the company, Google has created a culture of continuous learning and knowledge-sharing, demonstrating the power of micro-mentorship.

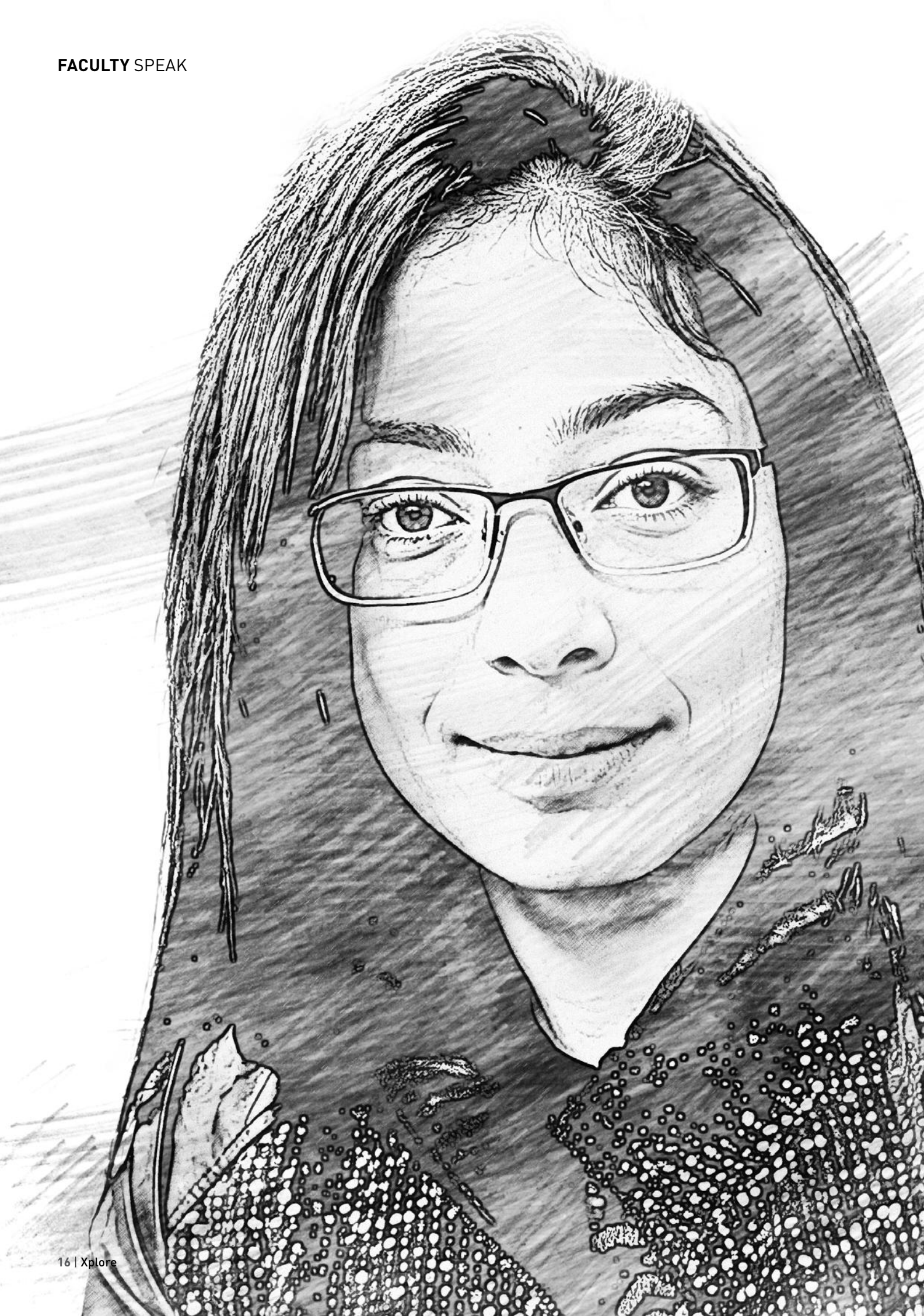
Rethinking Mentorship for Today's World

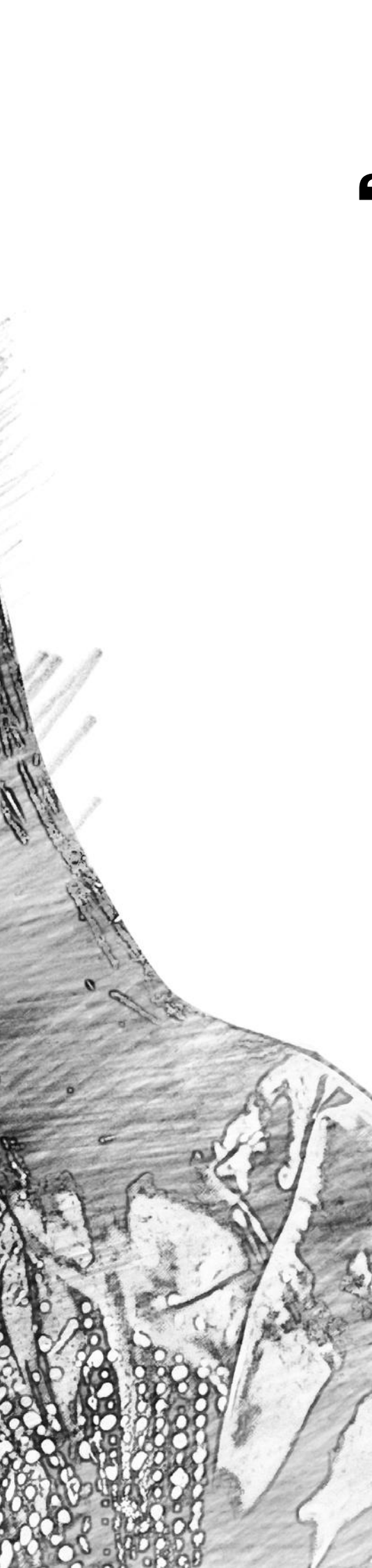
Micro-mentorship offers a flexible, impactful approach to mentorship that can drive personal and professional growth. By providing immediate, focused guidance, micro-mentorship addresses specific needs and challenges, fostering continuous learning and development. As organisations seek to support their employees in an ever-changing landscape, micro-mentorship will play a crucial role in building a resilient and skilled workforce.

In a world where time is a precious commodity, micro-mentorship stands out as a powerful tool for driving growth and success. By embracing this approach, individuals and organisations can unlock new opportunities for development and build a culture of mentorship that benefits everyone. As the business landscape continues to evolve, the adaptability and immediacy of micro-mentorship will be invaluable in navigating challenges and achieving excellence. ◀



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“The Real Value in Data Lies in Understanding the Why”

With a career that spans four prestigious institutions across India, Singapore and the UK, **Dr Pritha Guha** brings deep insight and clarity to her teaching of statistics and data science at XLRI Jamshedpur. In this conversation with *Vedant Bhayani*, she reflects on her academic journey, debunks common myths around her subject, and explains why MBA students must focus less on number-crunching prowess and more on conceptual understanding and curiosity to thrive in a data-driven world.

What inspired your journey into academia and led you to become an MBA faculty member?

I come from a family of professors and teachers, so in a way, I suppose teaching was my destiny! Honestly, I've always enjoyed learning new things — a trait that's essential in our profession — and sharing that knowledge with students. My father, a retired professor, found so much joy in teaching, and watching him was a major source of inspiration for me.

As for becoming an MBA faculty member, I think my interest in the various real-world applications of statistics naturally led me down this path.

What drew you to specialise in your field of management, and how has the field evolved over the years?

I began my academic journey as a mathematics honours student, drawn to the logic, structure and beauty of maths as a language. Over time, my interest gradually shifted towards statistics, especially after taking it as an elective during my school and college years. What really sparked my passion, though, was the realisation that statistics — and later

data science — offered a powerful way to make sense of the world around us.

A fun and early inspiration came from watching *Star Trek*. I was always fascinated by how the science officers on the ship would analyse data, discuss their findings and make decisions based on logic and evidence. That curiosity stayed with me and grew into a deeper desire to understand how data can be used to support reasoning and discovery.

Today, we live in a world that is increasingly driven by data. Everything from business strategy and healthcare to social media and public policy relies on our ability to collect, analyse and interpret information effectively. The field of data science has evolved rapidly, integrating computing, machine learning and real-time analytics with traditional statistical thinking. What excites me most is how this discipline continues to expand and influence decision-making in nearly every area of life.

You have been part of four premier universities/colleges across three countries throughout your academic career (as a student or professor).

The real value lies in understanding what you're looking for in the data, why it matters and how to make sense of it

Did you find any differences between these foreign universities and those in our country?

I've had the opportunity to study at St Xavier's College in Kolkata, IIT Kanpur, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the University of Birmingham in the UK. Each place taught me something unique, and I've tried to carry those lessons with me throughout my academic journey.

At St Xavier's, I learned the importance of discipline and structure — it built a strong foundation, both academically and personally. IIT Kanpur and NUS challenged me to push my limits. They showed me what it truly means to work hard and stay committed to a goal, even when things get difficult. The University of Birmingham, where I did my PhD, played a big role in shaping the way I teach — it taught me how to make learning more student-centred and how to think from a teacher's perspective.

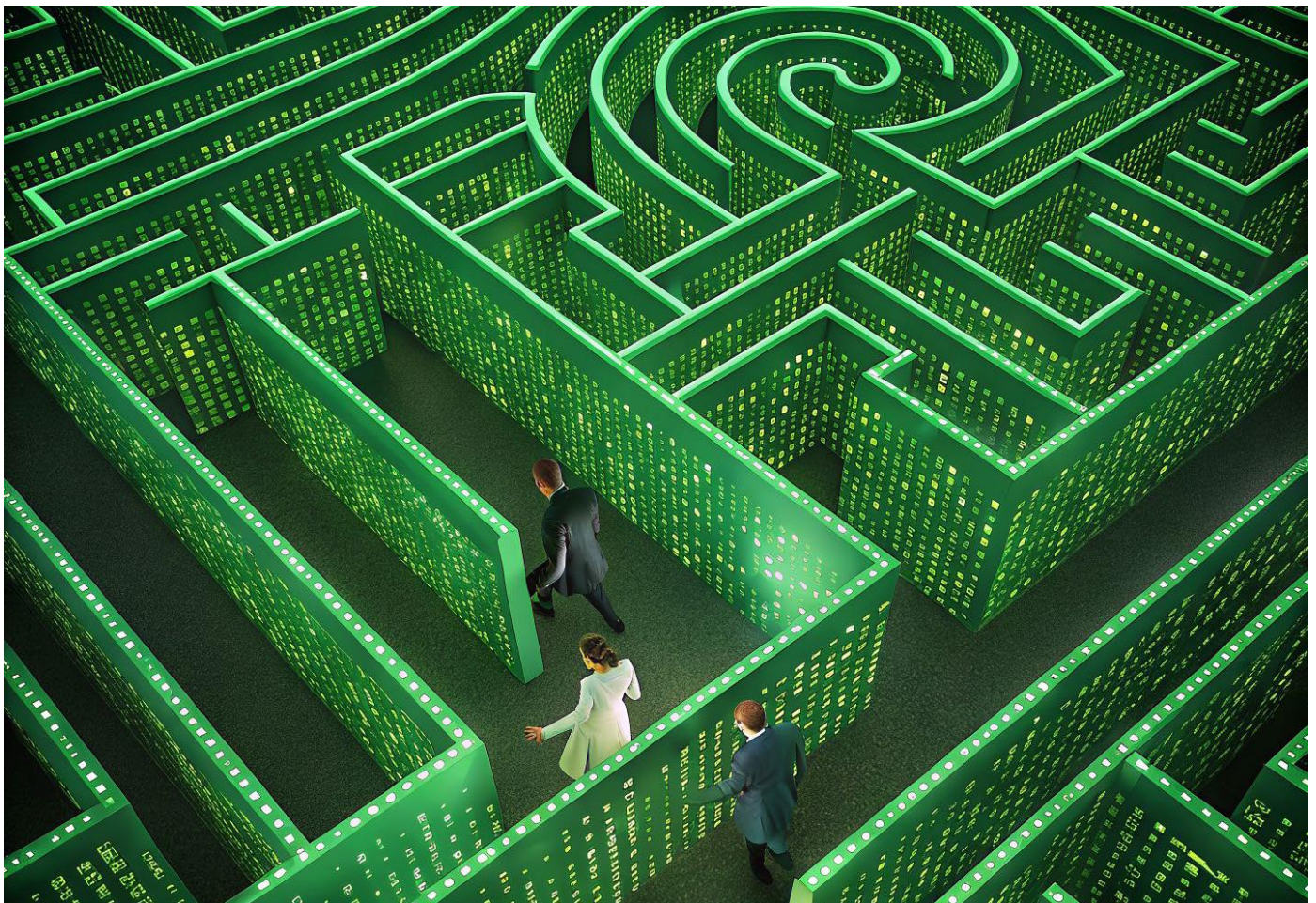
One thing I've come to realise through these experiences is that undergraduate education is often a

necessity — it gives you a base. But postgraduate study is a choice, and it requires a different kind of motivation. No one forces you to do it; you do it because you want to go deeper. That mindset shift is important.

In terms of differences, I'd say the structure and support systems in foreign universities often place more emphasis on independent learning, critical thinking and application. But I also believe we have brilliant minds and strong academic traditions here in India. What really matters, in the end, is the attitude you bring to learning — regardless of where you are.

Can you share a key concept or idea in your subject area that you believe every MBA student must understand deeply?

Statistics and data science are more important today than ever before. As we move deeper into the data-driven era, we are surrounded by vast amounts of information being collected



every second. But data alone is not useful unless we know how to interpret it. These subjects equip us with the tools to understand uncertainty, recognise patterns and make informed decisions. However, it's essential for students to realise that this field is not just about number-crunching or writing long pieces of code. The real value lies in understanding what you're looking for in the data, why it matters and how to make sense of it.

How do you incorporate real-world business challenges or trends into your teaching methodology?

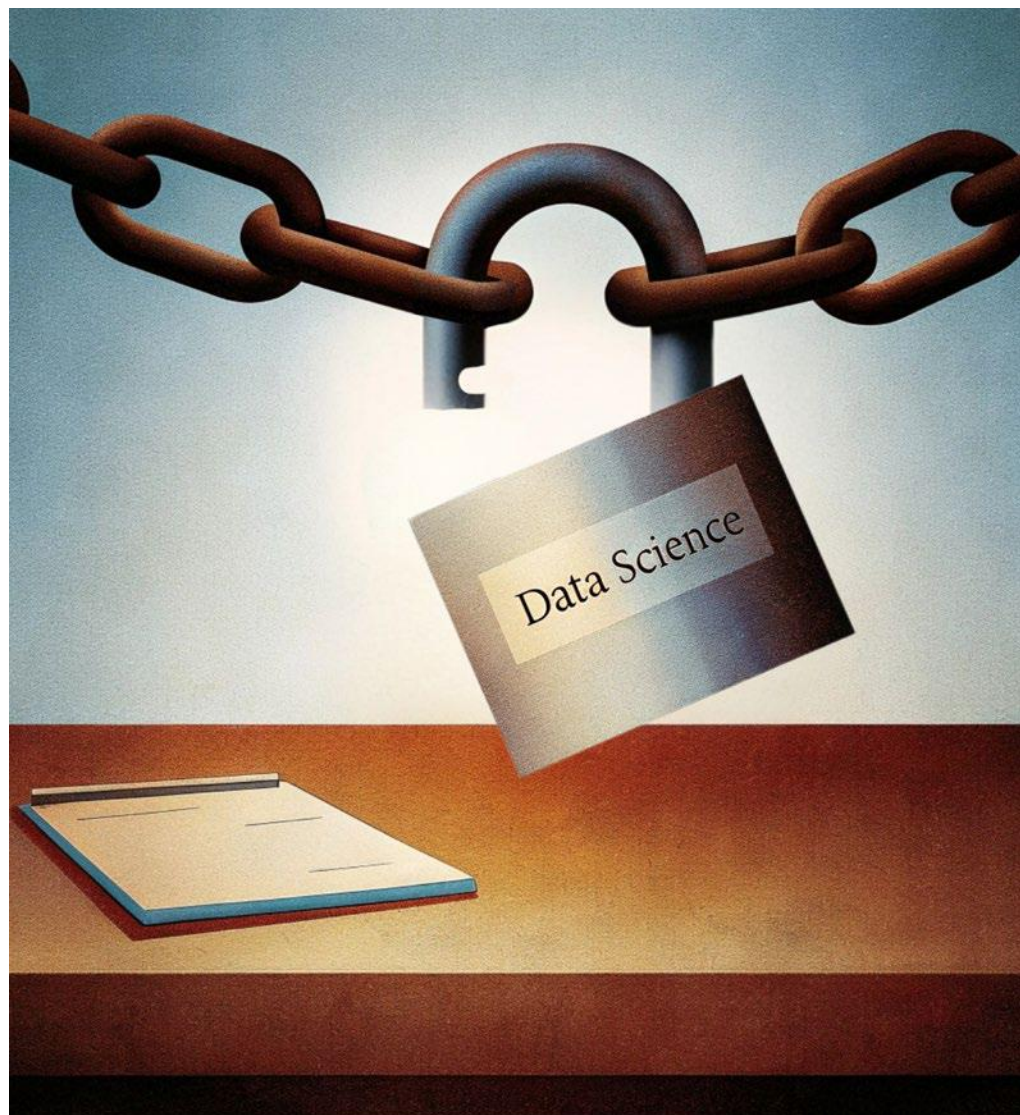
I try to keep up with what's happening in business and use similar examples in class. This helps students see how what they learn can be applied in real life. It also makes the lessons more interesting.

What common misconceptions do students usually have about your subject, and how do you address them?

A common misconception about statistics and data science is that they are only suited for students who are excellent at coding or have advanced mathematical abilities. This isn't true at all.

While technical skills are part of the toolkit, the core of both subjects lies in conceptual understanding. It's far more important to understand the *why* and *how* behind the analysis than to simply execute computations blindly. Without a clear grasp of the underlying concepts, even the most advanced code or mathematical formulas would not produce meaningful insights.

I encourage my students to actively participate in problem-solving during class. I invite them to come to the board, share their ideas and present their own approaches to solving problems. This not only builds confidence but also fosters collaborative learning and critical thinking. Since using specialised software is an essential part of this subject, I also motivate students to write code on their own and explore different coding approaches outside of class. For group assignments, I encourage independent research and hands-on practice so they can deepen their understanding and develop practical skills.



A common misconception is that statistics and data science are only for those with excellent coding or advanced mathematical abilities. This isn't true

What message or piece of advice would you like to share with current and aspiring MBA students?

Reading is one of the most valuable habits you can develop. I always recommend that students make time each day to read something — anything — that genuinely interests them. It doesn't have to be related to business. In fact, I encourage reading outside the business world — whether it's history, literature, art, science or philosophy. These kinds of readings broaden your perspective, fuel creativity and offer a mental break from the fast pace of business life.

Reading beyond your field not only keeps your mind fresh but also helps prevent burnout. It's often these unrelated subjects that offer the deepest insights and help you stay curious, balanced and energised over the long run. ◀



Mind the Culture Gap

Bridging cultural divides in the workplace

As workplaces grow more global, cultural clashes are inevitable. But with the right approach, these very tensions can fuel creativity and deeper collaboration

 by Mansi Tyagi



In today's globalised business landscape, companies are facing unique challenges stemming from cross-cultural dynamics. As research indicates, organisations are natural hotbeds for conflict, with cultural diversity adding layers of complexity. Differing values, beliefs, and communication styles can lead to misunderstandings, which further cause decreased productivity and workplace harmony.

However, these challenges also present opportunities for growth and innovation. Effective cross-cultural management, therefore, is not just about conflict resolution; it's about harnessing diverse perspectives for organisational success.

Companies that embrace situational and contextualised conflict management strategies, acknowledging the rich tapestry of cultural influences, stand to benefit from enhanced collaboration,

greater creativity, and a more inclusive work environment.

More Than Meets the Culture

Globalisation is amplifying cultural diversity and its complexity within every organisation. The cultural diversity within the workforce increases in complexity when we consider the interactions between their surface-level (demographic) and deep-level (psychological) characteristics.



Effective communication starts with humble inquiry – asking questions shows curiosity and openness to different cultural styles and norms

In addition, today's changing societal and cultural expectations, which are becoming more aware of diversity, require organisational leadership to rethink how they manage their multicultural workforce. Organisations need to balance their need to be sustainably competitive while ensuring that their culturally diverse workforce experiences greater inclusion and belonging at work.

Ask, Don't Assume

Effective management of these divides involves a blend of understanding, respect, and strategic action. First, acknowledging the inherent complexity of cultural diversity is essential. A leader has to recognise that team conflicts often stem from deep-seated values, beliefs, and perceptions, which depend quite significantly on cultural backgrounds.

Effective cross-cultural communication hinges on humble inquiry. Asking relevant questions about others' cultural styles, preferences, and norms is crucial and shows that the

person is curious and willing to learn.

Such understanding can be enhanced by personal research and an openness to learn about various cultural backgrounds. This practice should be inculcated in the organisation's culture for a more inclusive work environment.

From Conflict to Collaboration

To foster a harmonious and productive environment, leaders should focus on continuous transformation and constructive management of differences. This approach not only resolves conflicts but also encourages the expression of diverse perspectives, leading to better problem-solving and decision-making.

Incorporating regular training and development programmes that emphasise cross-cultural communication and empathy can significantly enhance team understanding and cohesion.

Another key strategy is promoting an inclusive culture where every team member feels valued and heard. This can be achieved by creating platforms for open dialogue, encouraging the sharing of cultural experiences to bring unique perspectives and ideas to the table, and actively involving all members in decision-making processes.

Also, leaders should implement clear and culturally sensitive feedback mechanisms so that if something is found inappropriate, it is addressed promptly and effectively. Leaders should foster a culture that focuses on helping people learn from their mistakes by giving genuine feedback instead of criticism and judgment.

In conclusion, effectively managing a culturally diverse team requires a blend of empathy, adaptability, and strategic action. By implementing these strategies, leaders can transform potential cultural conflicts into opportunities for growth, creativity, and enhanced team performance. ◀



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By the Numbers

With Project Oxygen, Google turned scepticism about managers into science — using data to uncover the traits that truly define effective leadership in fast-paced teams

 by Mukur Roy

Data is the new oil. Extensive analysis of data can provide an immense amount of knowledge, unique insights, and overall information about the target dataset. In the era of data-driven decision-making, companies across various industries are leveraging data analysis to gain insights into their operations and other decision-making processes. Google, a titan in the tech industry, is no exception. As one of the top tech companies in the world, it is quite normal for Google to apply data analytics to every decision-making process within the organisation. Project Oxygen is one such example that led Google to identify and enhance effective managerial practices.

The Genesis

Google, being a leader in the tech industry, is an engineer-heavy

organisation. Founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page once wondered whether it needed managers at all. The scepticism arose from a technocratic culture. The group that had the biggest problem with managers were the company's engineers.

Laszlo Bock, former senior vice-president of People Operations at Google, explained:

"Engineers generally think managers are at best a necessary evil, but mainly they get in the way, create bureaucracy, and screw things up."

However, with an almost completely flat organisational structure, the company faced reporting problems, as engineers were going directly to leadership for every issue that arose. As the company grew, the founders realised that managers perform other very important functions beyond merely being points of contact.

In 2008, Google launched Project Oxygen, which aimed to understand the importance of management practices

through research-based analysis and sought to identify the key qualities crucial for becoming an effective manager at Google.

A Data-Driven Approach

Google employed a rigorous, data-driven approach to kick off the project, conducting employee interviews, feedback forms, surveys, performance reviews, and other relevant data sources to gain qualitative insights into existing managerial practices.

One of the main data sources was the Oxygen survey, which helped the People Operations team gather valuable insights from employees about managerial practices. The survey covered aspects such as managerial communication, feedback, career development, core skills, vision and strategy, and other relevant metrics.

Eight Key Findings About Good Managers

- **Is a good coach:** Effective managers are first and foremost good coaches to their direct reports. They provide guidance, support, and encouragement to team members, uplifting morale and improving performance.
- **Empowers the team and does not micromanage:** A good manager stands by the team in every situation, empowering them to perform well by granting autonomy and full ownership of their work. They avoid micromanaging,



Project Oxygen showed that effective management isn't optional — it's essential, especially in fast-growing, engineer-led organisations



Google turned data into insight – identifying eight traits that define good managers, from coaching and communication to autonomy and strategic clarity

fostering flexibility, innovation, and creativity.

- **Expresses interest in team members' success and personal well-being:** Managers who genuinely care about their employees' well-being create an environment of open communication where employees feel safe sharing ideas and collaborating effectively.
- **Is productive and results-oriented:** By setting measurable goals and maintaining productivity, managers establish a vision for achieving objectives and continuously seek ways to improve team performance.
- **Is a good communicator:** Managers who actively listen and share ideas foster an environment where everyone feels valued, helping the team perform well.
- **Supports career development:** Good managers prioritise the development of their reports and team, providing the right guidance, time, and resources for individual career growth.
- **Has a clear vision/strategy for the team:** Whether leading a

project or an entire business unit, a manager must align with overall organisational goals, setting clear objectives and a strategic plan to achieve them.

- **Has key technical skills:** Managers must understand the team's work. With strong knowledge of core technologies and processes, they can guide the team effectively toward excellence.

Through extensive surveys and methodical data collection, Google conducted an in-depth analysis to identify these eight essential skills for effective managers. By focusing on these skills, managers can benchmark their progress and add value to the organisation, driving greater success. With this data-driven approach, Google pinpointed what truly matters for effective managerial leadership, providing actionable insights within a scalable and repeatable framework. ◀



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IGNITING
CONVERSATIONS
**SHAPING
FUTURES**

**VOICE
YOUR VISION**

**READY,
SET, DEBATE**

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“Human Judgment Still Drives Great Supply Chains”

With over two decades at Infosys Consulting and a foundation in metallurgy and manufacturing, **Joy Prakash Somani** brings a grounded, global perspective to modern supply chain challenges. In this candid conversation with *Abhishek Rao*, he reflects on cultural barriers in consulting, the enduring value of human judgment, and why a hybrid model of supply chain governance often works best in today's dynamic environment.

You're currently a Partner in the Manufacturing Practice at Infosys Consulting. After studying metallurgy at IIT BHU, you spent five years at Tata Steel before pursuing an MBA from XLRI. You joined Infosys in 2000 and have since held several key roles, including in international operations. Could you take us through this journey?

I come from a small town with very humble beginnings. I was fortunate enough to secure admission to the Ramakrishna Mission for my schooling. This environment provided me with opportunities not only to excel academically but also to pursue extracurricular activities, including acting, music, sports, and elocution.

During my undergraduate education at IIT BHU (now IIT Varanasi), I learned many new things and the tricks of the trade, which helped me navigate difficult situations. After my degree, I joined Tata Steel, where I spent five enriching years. This experience in a premier industrial setting gave me a solid foundation in manufacturing processes and corporate operations. At that point, I enrolled in the BM programme for

working executives offered by XLRI. Though managing work and studies simultaneously was quite stressful, I cherish this experience because I could directly apply classroom theory in an industrial setting. This engagement helped me immensely in my career going forward.

I joined Infosys in 2000, a time when the IT industry was growing rapidly. My desire to contribute to the expanding tech sector and gain global exposure drove this choice. My time at Infosys has been both gratifying and demanding, with a notable portion spent in international operations. It has given me many opportunities to interact with clients, boosting my confidence and consulting skills.

If you were to build a career today, would your approach be different? If so, how would you go about it?

As of today, I am content with my career path. If I were given the opportunity to go through this cycle again, I probably wouldn't change much. This is mainly because I find this journey professionally rewarding and personally satisfying.



Even with AI, supply chains need human judgment to navigate uncertainties. Math can't solve everything — teamwork and experience still drive success

I've always prioritised human connection and relationships. Infosys has shared this value throughout my time here. The company consistently puts its people at the forefront of its initiatives and strives to minimise unnecessary office politics. There's a strong emphasis on team spirit and enjoyment, fostering a great working atmosphere. Infosys has also provided multiple opportunities to learn and develop, for which I am truly grateful.

I'm approaching the final leg of this professional marathon. Going forward, I plan to stay engaged with students by sharing knowledge without unnecessary jargon. I look forward to simplifying complex concepts, providing actionable insights, and helping the next generation of professionals grasp key ideas quickly and effectively.

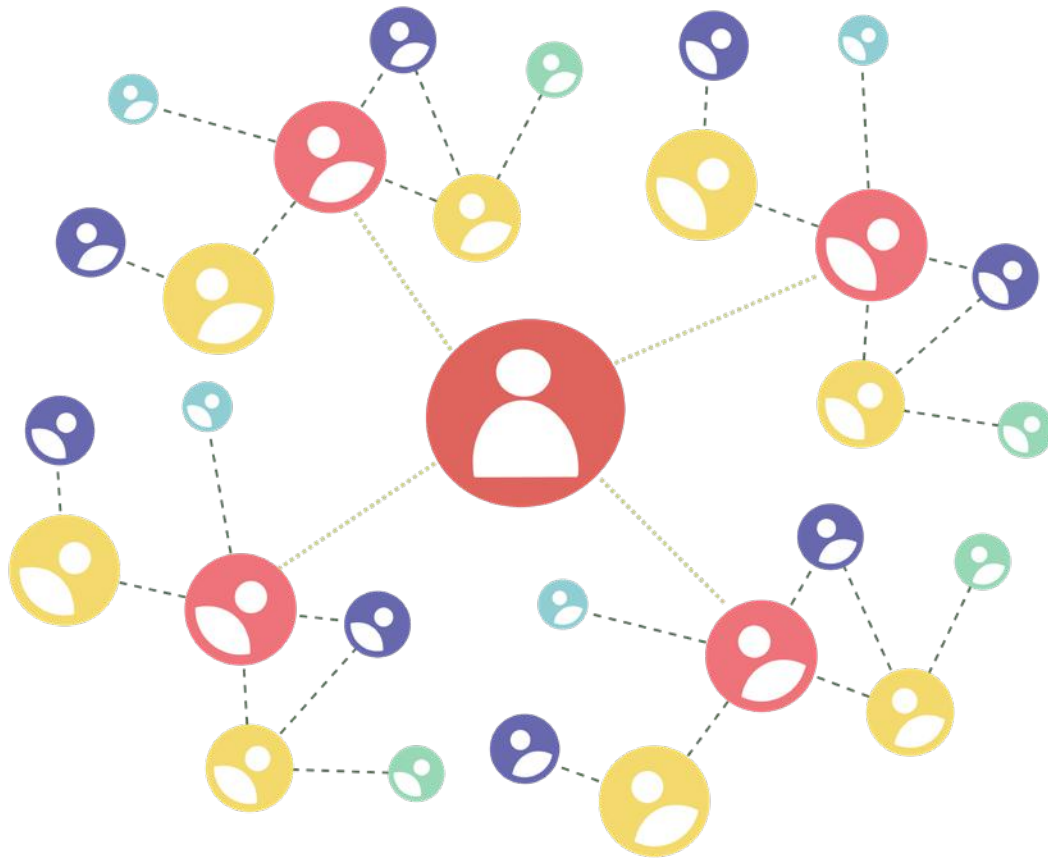
Today, you're a well-known leader in SCM and manufacturing, having

focused on unlocking value for Infosys. Of the many initiatives you've taken, which one are you most passionate and proud of?

I've always been committed to learning — and I'm still learning, particularly in supply chain and customer operations. Working with a client in the Middle East was a challenging and memorable experience. This project gave me an excellent opportunity to lead from conceptualisation to implementation. It was significant because it covered the entire solution lifecycle, including design, execution, and establishing a mutually agreed benefit-tracking mechanism.

There were two main obstacles. First, cultural attitudes: initially, it was hard to convince the client of our proposal due to preconceived notions about Indian professionals. While our IT proficiency was acknowledged, our grasp of business operations was questioned. The project's success





hinged on overcoming this perception barrier. Second, the client's mindset: as a regional leader with abundant natural resources, they believed their operational procedures were superior. Though this confidence was well-founded, it posed challenges when introducing new perspectives.

We had to balance respecting their existing processes while persuading them of the benefits of our strategies. Breaking down their business practices, gathering data, and generating insights was challenging but enlightening. It sharpened my consulting skills and cross-cultural competence, offering invaluable insights into complex operations in a different cultural context. Beyond meeting expectations, the project's success significantly advanced my professional growth and understanding of global business dynamics.

Back in 1998, you received Tata Steel's prestigious "Maple Leaf Award" for your insights on the future of purchasing and supply chain management. Looking back now, how accurate do you think your predictions were?

The Maple Leaf Award-winning paper I wrote two decades ago centred on the theme of connectedness between various operations in supply chain management and how bridging these would reduce organisational silos. Looking back, my approach was rooted in common sense. It's gratifying to see companies now investing heavily in information systems that foster this very connectedness. These IT investments help organisations shape data into insights for quicker, more accurate decision-making, faster customer reach, improved customer experiences, and reduced administrative redundancies.

With rapid advancements in technology, both manufacturing and supply chain management are undergoing significant transformations. How do you envision the landscape in these areas evolving in the coming years?

There's no doubt we've made progress in supply chain management, but only a select few companies have truly advanced. Many businesses remain constrained by longstanding challenges.

Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems are gaining traction,

A hybrid model works best – centralise for strategic control, decentralise for local execution. Supply chains today demand both consistency and agility

Data is everywhere, but without integration and alignment, it only adds noise. True insight comes from connecting processes, KPIs, and people

boosting efficiency by integrating and streamlining business activities. Strategic mergers and acquisitions are increasingly focused on enhancing supply chain capabilities — not just expansion. Companies now recognise the need for robust infrastructure and expertise to optimise supply chains. Some are even restructuring, spinning off or selling non-core segments to sharpen their focus and streamline operations.

While progress varies across industries, the trend is clear: supply chains are becoming more efficient, data-driven, and strategically aligned.

In today's rapidly evolving world, understanding the industry landscape is essential. As future managers, we must focus on potential disruptions while recognising the constants that remain. In your view, what aspects of this field have stayed consistent and are likely to endure?

Several constants in supply chain management have persisted and will remain critical:

- **Managing uncertainties** —

ensuring supplier continuity and on-time customer deliveries — remains a core challenge, even amid technological advances.

- **Human judgment** is irreplaceable. While automation and AI proliferate, complex decisions often require subjective analysis and multi-faceted perspectives.
- **Teamwork** is indispensable. Successful supply chains rely on collaboration, interpersonal skills, and strong team dynamics.

If supply chain problems could be solved purely mathematically, we'd have perfected them by now. The reality involves a complex interplay of factors defying algorithmic solutions. While technology evolves, these fundamentals will endure.

In today's world, what are some of the key challenges your clients are facing, and can you elaborate on the solutions you offer?

In working with clients, I've observed several prevalent challenges. A significant issue is the lack of





Great consulting delivers implementable solutions, not just boardroom strategies. We match deep expertise with measurable impacts – that's where real value lies

integration between organisational functions, creating silos. Often, one department is unaware of another's priorities — for example, production teams focused on productivity metrics may clash with sales teams prioritising demand fulfilment.

Another challenge is misaligned KPIs across organisational levels. High-level KPIs often fail to translate to operational goals, leaving departments working at cross-purposes.

Data fragmentation is equally persistent. Many companies have adopted applications for localised needs over time, resulting in disjointed data views. Coupled with unused reports and excessive data collection, this obscures valuable insights.

Additionally, process inconsistencies across regions or business lines create inefficiencies. Localised processes may work independently but resist change due to fear of disruption.

Our solutions focus on:

- *Process optimisation and KPI alignment* to break down silos.
- *Data integration and lean data management* to eliminate redundancies.
- *Change management* to address resistance.

The goal is integrated, data-driven operations that enhance decision-making and drive strategic outcomes.

In 2001, you won the Young Materials Manager Award for your insights on centralising vs decentralising supply chains. How have your views evolved? Is one approach more effective, or do you favour a hybrid model?

Based on my experience, I've come to believe that a hybrid model is often the most effective approach. This perspective has been shaped by recognising the complex and diverse needs of modern supply chains.

Certain elements of the supply chain are better suited for centralisation, while others benefit from decentralisation. Decision-making components often yield better results when centralised, as this allows for strategic alignment, economies of scale, and consistent policies across the organisation. On the other hand, execution-related aspects can be more effectively managed through decentralisation, which provides greater flexibility and responsiveness to local conditions and requirements.

A prime example of this hybrid approach can be seen in sourcing

**Overcoming
preconceptions
requires
respecting
existing
processes while
demonstrating
superior
strategies
— cultural
competence is as
vital as technical
skill**

activities. Centralised sourcing contracts leverage economies of scale and ensure consistency, while actual purchase orders and delivery management can be handled locally to address specific regional needs. Similarly, product design simplification — with its focus on enhancing fit, form, and function — can be effectively managed by a centralised team while still incorporating valuable input from regional teams.

It's important to note that the optimal balance between centralisation and decentralisation varies depending on a company's structure, culture, and specific industry requirements. While I advocate for a hybrid model, I emphasise the need to tailor this approach to each organisation's unique context.

Infosys Consulting was recently named one of the world's best management consulting firms by Forbes. How do you differentiate yourselves from competitors?

At Infosys Consulting, we stand apart through several key differentiators. Our primary focus is delivering practical,

implementable solutions that go beyond boardroom strategies. We excel at quickly understanding client challenges and mapping solutions to tangible, measurable impacts.

This capability stems from our strategic recruitment of industry experts with deep domain knowledge. By leveraging our extensive internal network, we deploy professionals with precisely matched expertise, forming cross-functional teams that deliver comprehensive, tailored solutions.

We invest heavily in continuous learning and AI-powered knowledge management, keeping us at the forefront of industry trends. Our distinctive culture fosters an enriching work environment with minimal bureaucracy, encouraging self-motivation and exceptional client service.

As part of the Infosys group, we uniquely combine consulting expertise with access to a vast range of technical capabilities. This allows us to assemble integrated teams delivering end-to-end solutions without relying on external partners — a truly differentiated offering in the consulting space.





What sets Infosys apart? Industry experts plus AI-powered learning plus minimal bureaucracy. But our real advantage is delivering complete solutions without relying on external partners

Manufacturing contributes significantly to Infosys' revenue and is among our fastest-growing segments. What strategies are you pursuing to expand this further?

We're driving growth in manufacturing through key focused strategies.

First, we're helping clients reduce costs by identifying operational inefficiencies and implementing solutions that streamline processes and lower overheads.

Second, we guide clients through digital transformation, helping them assess their current landscape and implement complementary ERP systems that integrate and optimise business processes.

Third, we've positioned ourselves as strategic partners for mergers, acquisitions and divestitures, helping clients navigate the complex operational challenges these transactions present.

Finally, we're pioneering 'Insight Factory' solutions — dedicated teams that continuously analyse data to provide clients with actionable insights, enabling better decision-making without straining their internal resources.

Some students in this batch are considering a career in consulting,

particularly those with previous work experience. How would you recommend they go about making this shift?

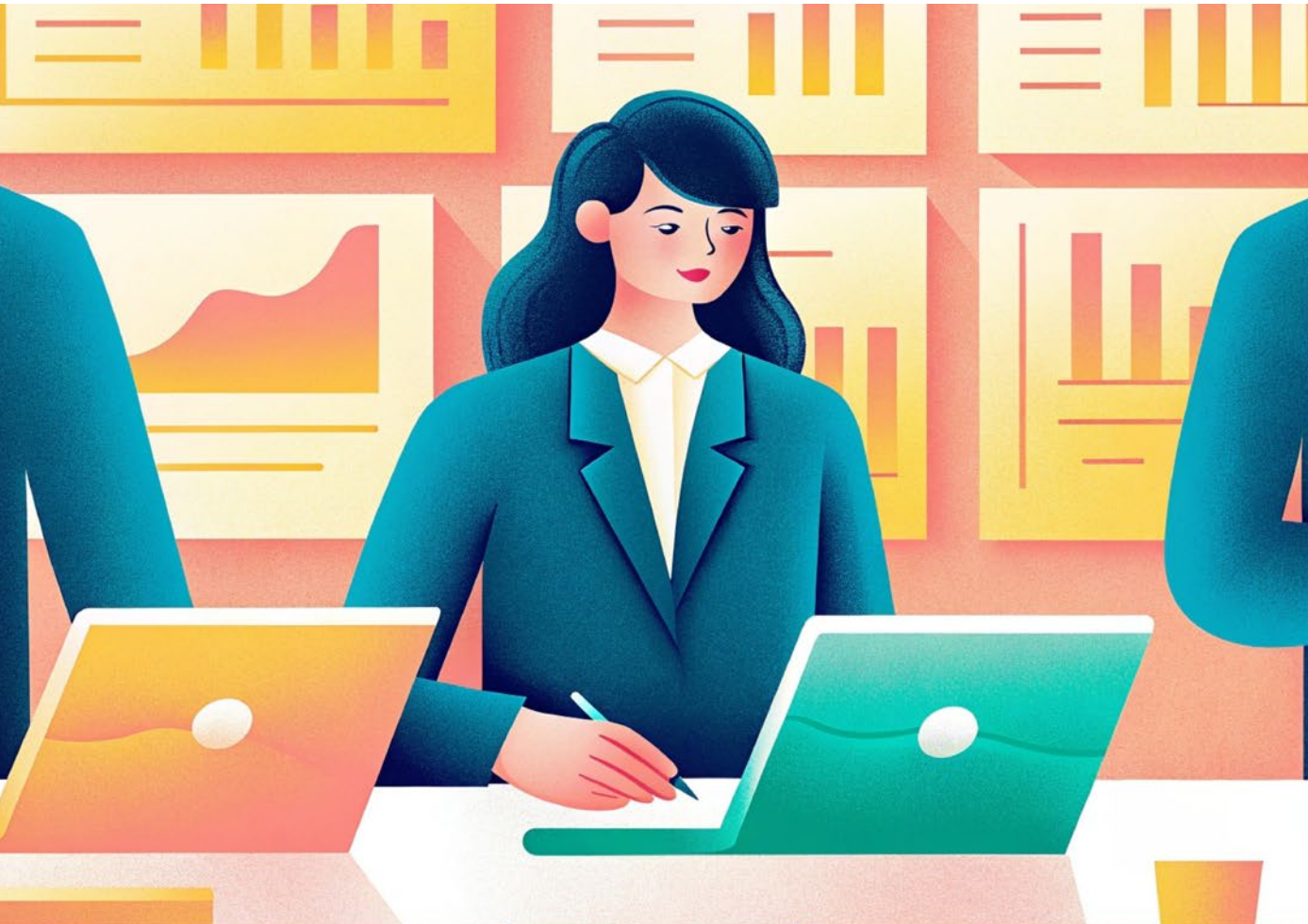
For students contemplating a move into consulting, I'd emphasise three crucial aspects based on their work experience:

First, cultivate a flexible learning mindset. Consulting offers exposure to diverse industries and challenges — this variety becomes your greatest teacher. Your existing work experience provides valuable context, but remain open to continuous learning across new domains.

Second, embrace mobility. Consulting often requires readiness to travel to client sites. This flexibility demonstrates commitment and provides invaluable on-ground insights.

Most importantly, maintain relentless focus on delivering client value. Successful consultants prioritise client outcomes above all else, building trust through tangible results. Your previous professional experience will help you understand real business challenges — leverage this while adapting to consulting's dynamic nature.

The transition rewards those who can balance their hard-earned experience with intellectual curiosity and adaptability. It's this combination that creates exceptional consultants. ◀



Hustle or Hibernate?

Gen Z Redefines Work

As Gen Z toggles between burnout and balance, a new work culture is emerging — one that values both ambition and the art of slowing down

 by Anjali K

The coming-of-age generation is split. On one end of the spectrum, we have the “chill, slow-living” crowd, who take a more minimalist and low-key approach. Conversely, hustle-culture folks wear badges of honour for long hours, extended overtime, and endless calls. Is one side superior to the other?

Work is no longer confined to cubicles and cold office spaces. With the rise of remote and hybrid

lifestyles, work is more fluid than ever. This generation’s biggest battle is a dichotomy of sorts: one faction appreciates the slow, minimalistic lifestyle, while the other operates in a dangerously competitive and high-achieving mode.

The Rise of the Slow Life

The idea of a laid-back work life — focusing on holistic well-being, mindfulness, and minimalism — is often viewed with scepticism. This clique operates as a silent revolution against burnout. Work is not the centrepiece of their identity but merely a component of a balanced life.

They value the freedom of time and shy away from corporate hierarchies. For them, being present is a way of life, an understanding far beyond existing regulations. This mindset is frequently seen as a lack of enthusiasm. A shift away from norms is always like a sore thumb sticking out, but in reality, it is an

awakening — a strong push against toxic productivity and capitalist excess.

Thriving in the Hustle Lane

On the other end of the spectrum, we have the so-called “corporate mazdoors,” pushing the clock and working overtime. Are they as fatigued as we claim? The high-focused, ladder-chasing cohort truly stretches itself — and finds joy in doing so. They are genuinely driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and thrive on the thrill of deadlines, the race against time, and the juggle, which isn’t a struggle.

They see work as a game of momentum, opportunity, and competitive edge. To them, sacrifice, dedication, and motivation are the drinks of choice, the ones they are most attuned to. Legacy and impact are functions of their being, and money might be an added badge; their branding is more soul-filling than they can fathom.

Each side is rooted in strong values — one prioritising balance, the other driven by ambition. Rather than viewing one as better, it’s more accurate to see this contrast as part of a larger cultural shift in how we define work.

A Flexible Future of Work?

The real issue is not which side is superior, but how society can allow them to coexist meaningfully. The future of work should be adaptable — a one-size-fits-all routine is a dying concept. Respect for everyone across the spectrum is ultimately needed to create a space of optimised and maximum impact. After all, innovation needs sprints and retreats. Culture needs creators and curators. Growth requires burnout prevention and drive.

In the end, the ultimate evolution of work may not lie in choosing hustle or slow living — but in mastering the ability to shift between the two when needed. With its boldness and boundary-setting, Gen Z may be the generation to show us how. ◀



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“AI Can’t Read the Room”

With nearly two decades of experience in M&A and tax advisory, **Ritesh Kumar**, Partner at BDO India, has seen the industry transform — from stacks of paper files to AI-assisted diligence. But as he tells *Thrisha Santhosh*, even the smartest tools can’t replace human instinct, context or credibility. In this candid conversation, Kumar shares his sharp insights on the evolving nature of consulting, the real impact of innovation and start-ups, and why judgment, trust, and old-school sincerity still define success in a tech-driven world.

BDO has been successful in building a credible and sustainable consulting practice — especially in the domain of tax. What does it take to build and sustain a long-term practice in this space?

Traditionally, tax practices in India were dominated by accountants working independently or through local set-ups. But post-2000, the landscape changed quite dramatically. Global firms began entering India and actively participating in the market. That shift brought about new ways of working — particularly a greater focus on advisory rather than just routine compliance.

India itself has evolved significantly over the past 30 years. We’re now able to offer much more value-added work to our clients.

So what does it take to build a practice like this? I’d say, fundamentally, it starts with getting the right people — people who want to do the right thing, who are committed to serving clients even when it’s not easy. You will always come across clients who want shortcuts or hold preconceived ideas about India. Building a sustainable practice requires a dedicated team, a clear outlook, and a focus on

differentiated services that truly add value. That’s what sets a firm apart today.

Your organisation hires professionals who are at constant risk of being poached. How do you attract and retain the right talent in such a competitive, high-skill industry? What’s your attrition rate like, and how do you manage it?

Globally, there are six large players in our space, and BDO ranks fifth. I spent 13 years at EY, so I’ve seen both ends — from the largest to the fifth largest. Attrition and talent attraction are big challenges, not just for us, but across the board.

One of the key shifts is generational. The working style today doesn’t align with the old-school model. Many firms like ours were founded by people now in their 60s — people who came up in a time when using a computer was a privilege. Today’s workforce expects flexibility: working from home, informal attire, mental health support. And rightly so.

Attracting talent involves two things: offering meaningful qualitative attributes, and preparing the workforce. In our world — navigating complex legislation — it’s tough to find people

Technology can't read the room — it lacks instinct, context and credibility. In consulting, human judgment remains the edge clients will always seek

who are not just qualified but also employable. Many graduates might have strong academic credentials but lack communication or practical skills.

Then there's the competition. Start-ups today offer newly qualified accountants packages of ₹18 lakh per annum, while consulting firms like ours might start them at ₹12–13 lakh. Long term, consulting does pay off with faster growth and real increments — but it comes with hard work. Clients won't wait for you to get back "in time"; they expect timely solutions, or they'll go elsewhere.

The consulting culture itself takes time to adapt to. Many join us with great enthusiasm, but within a year realise it's not for them. It's demanding. And yes, things like family pressure, or even social media incidents — like that much-discussed episode involving EY and LinkedIn — add to the challenges.

But when you do retain and nurture talent, that's when others notice. Look at me — I was at EY for 13 years. They

invested in me, and eventually, BDO made me an offer I couldn't refuse. That's just how it goes. Loyalty today lasts 5 to 7 years, if you're lucky. As a partner, I'm always looking for the next person who will stay the course.

One more thing: honesty matters. You can't sell a rosy dream and then show them a different reality. I've found that this generation appreciates transparency. They respect it — and I respect them more for that.

You have 18 years of experience in the transaction advisory domain. What does it take to establish yourself in that industry?

Transaction advisory is a fairly complex domain. To understand what it takes to succeed, let me briefly explain what we do. Broadly, our job is to help clients acquire good-quality companies or assets — whether they're buying in India or expanding overseas. So when you read that Company A has acquired





Company B, there's a lot more behind the scenes. That's where professionals like me come in.

We start by understanding the client's inorganic growth objectives and identifying potential targets. Once we have a shortlist, we conduct due diligence — digging into the affairs of the company to ensure there are no hidden liabilities, contingent risks, or pricing mismatches.

Once diligence is done — and the 'marriage' begins — my role becomes more hands-on. Alongside legal advisers, we structure the deal, advise on governance for the acquired entity, and address tax considerations. A good example is when Gokaldas Exports acquired Matrix Clothing. We were advising Gokaldas and flagged some issues that required structuring the transaction in a specific way. That's how the deal took shape, with a lot of legal and financial documentation behind it.

After closing, another team usually steps in to manage post-deal integration. So, transaction advisory spans strategy, diligence, structuring, and integration.

To thrive here, you must be

extremely detail-oriented — even a misplaced comma in a legal document can change the entire meaning. You also need to be fast, technically sharp, and commercially aware. There's no 'off' switch. If a client in the US calls at 1 am, you pick up — because that's when the deal is live.

In many ways, we're like doctors. We may not save lives, but we certainly save money. And clients depend on our accuracy and judgement.

You have to keep your technical knowledge constantly updated — how courts interpret language, how laws evolve. You must be accessible. A brilliant adviser who's unavailable isn't helpful. Clients value reliability as much as expertise. So, I'd say technical competence, responsiveness, attention to detail, and building trust — those are the key ingredients.

And yes, these qualities apply across many industries, but in consulting, they're non-negotiable. Even internally, you want your team members to be responsive and dependable. That's what sets you apart and helps you grow.

How is the taxation industry adapting to today's changing dynamics —

Startups may look flashier, but they've pushed us to modernise, rethink frameworks and expand our legal and financial vocabulary in powerful ways

A misplaced comma in a legal document can change a deal. Precision, speed and trust are non-negotiable in transaction advisory

particularly after the pandemic and amid evolving laws?

There have been massive changes. Back in 2019, if someone had asked to work from home, it would likely have been frowned upon — definitely not approved. But the pandemic reshaped everything.

Earlier, reviews involved stacks of physical papers, red and green pens, margin notes — we worked that way for years. Suddenly, that all disappeared. We had to adapt to an online, tech-driven workflow overnight.

In many ways, the younger generation thrived, while those stuck in older methods struggled. It wasn't just about using a computer — it was about collaborating in real time, across cities, using cloud-based tools. Platforms like Google Sheets, where multiple people can edit simultaneously, became game changers.

The way we prepare and deliver work has completely transformed. Today, our teams don't come to the office every day. There are scheduled days, but work continues seamlessly. Some of us old-school types might argue that efficiency has dropped — but honestly, that's more

perception than fact. If there had been a real dip in efficiency, our practice wouldn't have grown the way it has — in terms of both headcount and revenue.

We're now in a world where someone can be in Bangalore in the morning, on a client call in Kolkata in the afternoon, and virtually attending a meeting in the US by evening. That flexibility and reach are now the norm.

So yes, the pandemic accelerated a shift that was long overdue. It's changed how we work, collaborate, and even how we define presence.

The start-up culture has grown enormously in India. How has that affected the audit and transaction advisory industry?

Startups have had a profound impact — both on our work and on talent dynamics. Let's be honest, what we do in audit and transaction advisory is considered boring by many, while the startup world is seen as dynamic and exciting. And that perception does affect us. For instance, a startup like Swiggy can offer ₹18-24 lakh salary packages





The old-school model is over. Today's professionals want flexibility, empathy, and transparency — and they deserve all three

and easily attract people, whereas we might struggle to match that.

But there's a flip side to it, and it's largely positive. Startups have brought in a lot of technology and forced us to modernise. We were talking earlier about how AI can now help draft legal documents or how digital tools can manage stock option records. These innovations have made our lives easier in many ways.

Startups have also created a tremendous amount of work for us — especially in areas that were once unfamiliar. Concepts like liquidation preference or waterfall distribution used to be niche or US-centric. But with VC-backed startups in India, we've had to understand and apply these frameworks within Indian legal structures. That has expanded our knowledge base and kept us on our toes.

So yes, startups have reshaped our work — by challenging us, by teaching us, and by pushing the boundaries of what we thought was possible.

What role is innovation — especially digital tools and AI — playing in reshaping M&A practices today?

There's immense scope, and we're already seeing exciting changes. Let's take due diligence, for instance.

Earlier, it meant laborious sample testing — painstakingly going through documents manually. Today, tools can analyse a company's bank statements and flag suspicious transactions or detect patterns suggesting preferential vendor treatment. It's powerful.

AI is also helping draft agreements. What once took hours of manual labour can now be done in a fraction of the time with high accuracy. And that's just the beginning.

Even legal research has become more accessible. The Supreme Court now offers decades of judgments in searchable, downloadable formats. Earlier, this would have required costly subscriptions. Today, it's all a few clicks away.

And courts themselves have transformed. You're no longer allowed to carry bulky paper files into the Supreme Court — it's all digital now. Arguments happen off iPads. So from courtrooms to conference rooms, innovation is already revolutionising the way we operate in M&A.

Do you believe that technology can replace humans in taxation, legal compliance, or accounting? How real is the threat?



You can't sell rosy dreams to talent anymore. Be honest upfront — this generation values candour and respects it deeply

Let me put it simply: human instinct is irreplaceable.

You can automate a lot of processes. AI can summarise case laws in minutes — something that used to take an associate an entire day. It can draft documents, flag risks, and speed up routine tasks. So yes, it will reduce the number of people we hire for clerical or repetitive work. That era of hiring based purely on volume is ending.

But what technology can't replace is judgment. It can't read the room. It can't evaluate behaviour, body language, or draw on contextual insight. It doesn't have instincts. And in our business — whether you're advising on a merger or interpreting tax nuances — instinct and judgment make all the difference.

So no, technology won't replace professionals. It will, however, demand that we upskill and move up the value chain.

Based on your journey, what advice would you give to the youth of today?

First and foremost, be honest. Not just

in the sense of integrity, but in truly expressing what you feel. I find that many in the younger generation struggle with this — whether it's in personal relationships or professional settings. They bottle things up rather than just being upfront.

Honesty is hard. It makes you say uncomfortable things. But it gives you peace of mind. It's better to be honest with a client and say, "We're running behind," than overpromise and then struggle to deliver. It's better to say, "I'm not ready," than enter something you're unsure of. It's difficult — but it makes life easier in the long run.

Second, be sincere. Sincerity to your cause matters. You will have choices. You'll be tempted to take shortcuts or switch paths quickly. But if you believe in something, stick with it. Keep your head down and work sincerely — even if success takes longer. That's what builds character.

So yes, it sounds basic — be honest and be sincere. But these are your foundation stones. Without them, no amount of talent or opportunity will hold up. ◀



IGNITING
CONVERSATIONS
**SHAPING
FUTURES**

TESTING, TESTING... MIC CHECK DONE. WE'RE ROLLING
LET'S HAVE A CHAT... SPEAK UP, STAND OUT



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Between Intention and Impact

When Meaning Misses the Mark

Even well-meant words can land wrong. This piece explores how everyday misfires in communication can quietly erode trust, morale — and team culture

 by Naveen Mathew

I would like to start with an example. Mr David, a team lead for the marketing division of an FMCG company, had asked his subordinates to complete a presentation for their new product, which they had to pitch to their client before the deadline — just two days away.

Even though the task seemed impossible with such a short turnaround time, the team worked extra hours to complete it and delivered the presentation to Mr David before the deadline. David was very happy to receive it on time, so he sent a message to the entire group: *“Thank you all. Please work on the rest of your tasks.”*

Though he was genuinely thankful and indebted to his colleagues, the message left them feeling rejected and unrecognised. They had worked late nights and over the weekend, sacrificing personal time to meet the deadline, yet received no appreciation.

When Good Intentions Backfire

After that day, David noticed the team’s productivity drop. They seemed demotivated and were quiet in meetings. Only when someone pointed it out did he realise his message had not landed as intended. He was surprised — he had not meant to hurt anyone. Soon after, he called a follow-up meeting, apologised for the unintended offence,

and praised each team member for their contribution.

In this scenario, the gap between intention and impact is clear. What one person means to convey and how another interprets it can differ significantly. This happens often in life. Some of it depends on your character, mannerisms, or how others perceive you — even if you don’t mean it that way. And saying *“I didn’t mean that”* afterwards doesn’t always undo the harm. In some cases, it makes things worse.

Staying True to Your Voice

To some extent, I believe this is uncontrollable. How can you know how others will interpret your words? Is it necessary to always filter yourself just to blend in? Even if you do, are you being true to yourself or the personality you take pride in?

I don’t think so. It’s about staying true to your values. With that foundation, you’ll cultivate respect — whether at work or in personal life — regardless of the group you’re in. ◀



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When Brand Isn't Really Brand **Any more**

At the Mumbai Xplore roundtable, business leaders and faculty confronted a subtle identity crisis inside modern marketing. As algorithms, founders, and quarterly targets shape the narrative, the meaning of “brand” itself seems to be fragmenting — often thriving on momentum, but losing its centre.





COVER STORY

Somewhere along the way, brand stopped being a centre — and became a blur. What was once a distinct identity, shaped over time, now feels like a mash of borrowed voices, urgent metrics, and algorithmic mimicry. At the Mumbai roundtable, this slow dilution of brand meaning surfaced in sharp, sometimes uneasy ways.

The Illusion of Love

Most customers aren't loyal. They're simply comfortable. With saved cards,

auto-renewals, and one-click buying, behavioural convenience is often mistaken for emotional connection. The group dissected how brands overestimate their "love" scores, confusing usage inertia for true affinity — and how quickly that house of cards collapses when switching becomes frictionless.

The 90-Day Brand Game

Building a brand was once a patient craft. Now it's a performance metric.





Attendees: **Ajay Dang**, Ultratech; **Amitabh Jaipuria**, Accelerate Indian Philanthropy; **Anchal Chaudhary**, BCG; **Aniruddha Khekale**, Waaree Group; **Archanaa Chindarkar**, Larsen & Toubro; **Ashish Seth**, Tata Sons; **Jayanta Prabhu**, Black Box; **Mahesh Gera**, Rustomjee; **Nitin Wadhwa**, UKG; **Parthasarathy V S**, Independent Director; **Pradeep Dwivedi**, Eros International Media; **Preeti Bose**, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas; **Puneeth Bekal**, HDFC Securities; **Sandeep Juneja**, DHL; **Sanjeev Mittal**, Scotia Bank; **Saumil Mehta**, Welspun Living Limited; **Sumit Neogi**, FedEx; **Sunish Jose**, Publicis Global Delivery; **Viral Ozaseni**, former CMO Mahindra Livspace



Leaders debated how leadership churn, quarterly KPIs, and the obsession with immediate wins erode long-term brand equity. In this cycle, vision is often sacrificed for vanity — and companies trade future loyalty for today's applause.

Algorithms Decide. Not Audiences.
Branding is increasingly built for the

platform, not the person. From SEO tweaks to algorithm-chasing content, marketers are bending to what machines reward. The conversation exposed how brand storytelling has flattened into predictable formats, losing creativity in favour of “safe” visibility — where relevance means surviving the feed, not owning the mind.



When the Founder Becomes the Brand

From cult personalities to viral founders, modern brands often borrow their energy from the individual at the top. But while founder charisma creates velocity, it also risks identity fragility. Leaders debated how deeply brands now hinge on personal visibility — and whether true institutional brands can still emerge without a face.

The Mumbai Xplore discussion closed on an uncomfortable reflection: Is brand still a crafted asset — or just a moving sum of momentum, convenience, and personalities? In trying to stay relevant, are brands quietly surrendering the very roots that once made them distinct? ◀



The Hired Gun Paradox

Steering the Ship — or the Story?

Consultants often walk a tightrope between client demands and ethical clarity — where truth-telling can either build trust or break business



In the world of consulting, ethics are often seen in black and white. More often, they reside in shades of grey — or sometimes darker shades of grey. This is particularly true when the requirements of the client subtly conflict with principles of truth and “taking one for the team.” Where should the line be drawn for ethics?

Spin Doctors in Suits?

This paradox arises when consultants are hired not to uncover the truth, but to build a narrative for the hiring leaders. It often plays out quietly: a CEO or board member engages a consulting firm to evaluate an underperforming division or project. On a whiteboard, the official objective is presented as diagnosis and insight, but beneath the surface lies an unspoken goal — to find fault with a particular leader, justify a management

reshuffle, or steer the board toward a specific conclusion.

From a broader firm perspective, it is good monetary gain, but for the consultant, it raises the question: should they take one for the team, or negotiate their life principles? The danger is subtler. Consultants are often nudged to “focus the analysis here” or “not dig too deeply there.” Over time, this gentle shaping of direction can erode objectivity and condition professionals to prioritise alignment over accuracy.

Such behaviour not only impacts the consultant’s conscience but can corrode trust in the organisation’s credibility. Consultants are often seen as the lens for corporate politics, their purpose guiding the lead to make small decisions that jeopardise bigger ones. Worse, if not acted upon, this can lead organisations to long-term strategic damage.

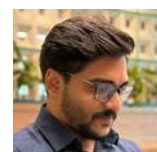
So where should one draw the line?

The Mirror Is Mightier

It begins with reframing the role of a consultant. The job is not simply to serve the client’s request, but to serve the client’s interest — and that includes being honest, even when it’s uncomfortable. A trusted adviser must sometimes tell hard truths, challenge assumptions, and expose the real source of failure, even if that means the finger points higher up than expected.

Consulting firms, too, have a role to play. They must build cultures where integrity is rewarded, not punished. Leaders should protect and empower their teams to speak truth to power, even when it risks upsetting high-level clients.

While delivering what the client wants might win a project, delivering what the client needs is what builds a legacy. In the long run, consultants who choose truth over convenience become trusted partners. The hired gun may pull the trigger, but the trusted adviser holds up the mirror. ◀



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“Governance is Like Stepping into a New Role Each Time”

From a mechanical engineer to an IAS officer, **Ananya Mittal's** journey reflects adaptability, purpose, and a deep commitment to public service. Currently serving as District Collector, Jamshedpur, Mittal discusses the value of structured thinking, integrating AI into governance, and tailoring leadership styles to evolving administrative challenges. In this conversation with *Gannu Murali Krishna*, he shares insights on building participatory institutions, bridging the skill gap, and what it truly takes to serve in the public domain today.

You graduated as a mechanical engineer from Delhi College of Engineering. What inspired your transition into civil services, and how has your background in mechanical engineering influenced your approach to administration?

My decision to pursue civil services was primarily driven by a deep-seated desire to serve people.

Coming from a business family where everyone is engaged in entrepreneurship rather than jobs, I was always aware of the value of education. My family emphasised exploring new frontiers, including education and public service, which played a significant role in shaping my aspirations.

Though the idea of joining civil services was always at the back of my mind, I wasn't preparing for it seriously in the beginning. It was only when my college friends started preparing for their MBA that I felt the urgency to take a definitive step toward my goal. That's when my long-standing interest in public service took centre stage, and I began my preparations in earnest.

Ultimately, my transition was fuelled

by two key factors — my intrinsic motivation to contribute to society and my family's encouragement to break new ground beyond business.

As an engineer entering civil services, did you find that your background gave you any advantages? There's often a belief that engineers have an edge in both the exam and the job itself. Did you notice any specific benefits from your academic training?

Yes, there are two key aspects of being an engineer that have helped me in civil services.

First, on the technical side, government projects often involve engineering-focused departments. My background gives me a solid understanding of these projects, allowing me to grasp their technical aspects more effectively and engage meaningfully with implementation teams.

Second, engineering instils a kind of crisis management mindset. Many engineers are familiar with last-minute problem-solving — preparing for exams under tight deadlines and managing multiple tasks simultaneously. That



Governance often demands flexibility – while we start with structured planning, real-world challenges force us to adopt a more agile, adaptive approach

adaptability has been invaluable in service, where unexpected challenges frequently arise. The ability to stay composed and trust the process, even in high-pressure situations, is something I carried forward from my engineering days.

Additionally, an engineering education fosters a structured, methodical approach to problem-solving. It teaches you to break down complex challenges into logical steps, strategise solutions, and execute them efficiently. This systematic thinking has been incredibly useful in administration, helping me tackle issues with clarity and precision.

In the corporate world, agile methodology is widely used for project execution, emphasising short-term planning and adaptability to ad hoc changes. In contrast, the waterfall approach involves detailed upfront planning with minimal changes during execution. While corporate environments favour agility, how does this translate to administration and bureaucracy? Do you see similarities, or does governance require a different approach?

There are definitely similarities, particularly in terms of crisis management. In administration, we aim to plan thoroughly before execution

— much like the waterfall approach. However, once implementation begins, unforeseen challenges often emerge, requiring us to adapt and modify our strategy on the go.

In practice, while we may start with a structured plan, the dynamic nature of governance often pushes us towards a more agile approach. We continuously reassess, make adjustments, and strategise in response to real-time developments. So, while administration may not explicitly follow corporate agile frameworks, the core philosophy of flexibility and responsiveness is very much the same.

You have served in various administrative roles across Jharkhand. Can you share a complex challenge you faced in your career and how you navigated it? Any particularly interesting experience that comes to mind?

One of the biggest challenges I faced was adapting to the different leadership styles required for each administrative role. When preparing for civil services, we get a theoretical understanding of governance — both during exam preparation and training at LBSNAA (Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration). However, the real





challenge begins when you step into the field and realise that each role demands a different version of yourself.

For instance, as a probationer in Jamshedpur, my focus was on learning and absorbing as much as possible. But when I became Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) in Dhanbad, my role was entirely different — I had to enforce law and order, take tough regulatory decisions, and maintain a strong, assertive presence in the field. This required a significant shift in my personality and approach.

Later, as Deputy Development Commissioner (DDC) in Simdega, the role changed again. Here, instead of strict enforcement, I had to facilitate development projects, bring stakeholders together, and be inclusive in planning and execution. While discipline was still crucial, collaboration became a key skill.

Then, as Deputy Commissioner of Chaibasa, I had to balance both — maintaining law and order while overseeing development initiatives. The challenge in each transition was understanding what the role demanded, adapting accordingly, and executing effectively.

In a way, it's like being an actor stepping into different roles. You have to quickly assess the situation, mould yourself to fit the job, and perform at your

best — all while ensuring that governance remains effective and impactful.

AI has become a buzzword, with corporations heavily investing in its applications. In the realm of public policy and administration, how do you see AI and data analytics transforming governance? From your perspective, how efficiently can the government leverage AI for public service delivery?

AI is undeniably shaping the future, and the government is already utilising data analytics and intelligence networks. However, its application needs to be more widespread and deeply integrated into governance mechanisms.

For example, AI can play a crucial role in optimising water distribution systems, helping to reduce wastage and improve efficiency. Similarly, in public transportation, AI-driven models can enhance route planning, reduce congestion, and improve service reliability.

One of the most impactful areas where AI can be leveraged is in grievance redressal. Currently, citizens file complaints, which require manual processing, resolution, and feedback loops. AI-powered systems can streamline this by categorising complaints, predicting common issues, prioritising urgent matters, and even suggesting solutions based on

Each administrative role needs a different version of you. Governance is like stepping into a new role every time, demanding fresh perspective and energy

AI can help predict, prioritise, and even suggest solutions in grievance redressal – transforming public service into a faster, smarter, citizen-centric experience

historical data. This can significantly enhance response times and overall administrative efficiency.

If AI is effectively utilised for public grievances and service delivery, a significant portion of governance challenges can be addressed proactively. In the future, AI will not just be an enabler but a fundamental tool in building a more responsive and citizen-centric administration.

You received the Best Electoral Practice Award for your efforts in Jamshedpur, East Singhbhum district. Could you highlight a particular initiative or strategy that contributed to this success? What did you do differently?

In 2024, we conducted two elections in Jamshedpur — first the Lok Sabha elections, followed by the Vidhan Sabha elections with a three-month gap in between.

For the Lok Sabha elections, our primary challenge was urban voter apathy. The Chief Electoral Officer and the Honourable CEC tasked us with increasing voter turnout, particularly in urban areas where participation was historically low. We engaged multiple stakeholders, including private and government companies, NGOs, institutions, and interest groups, to encourage voting. While this outreach

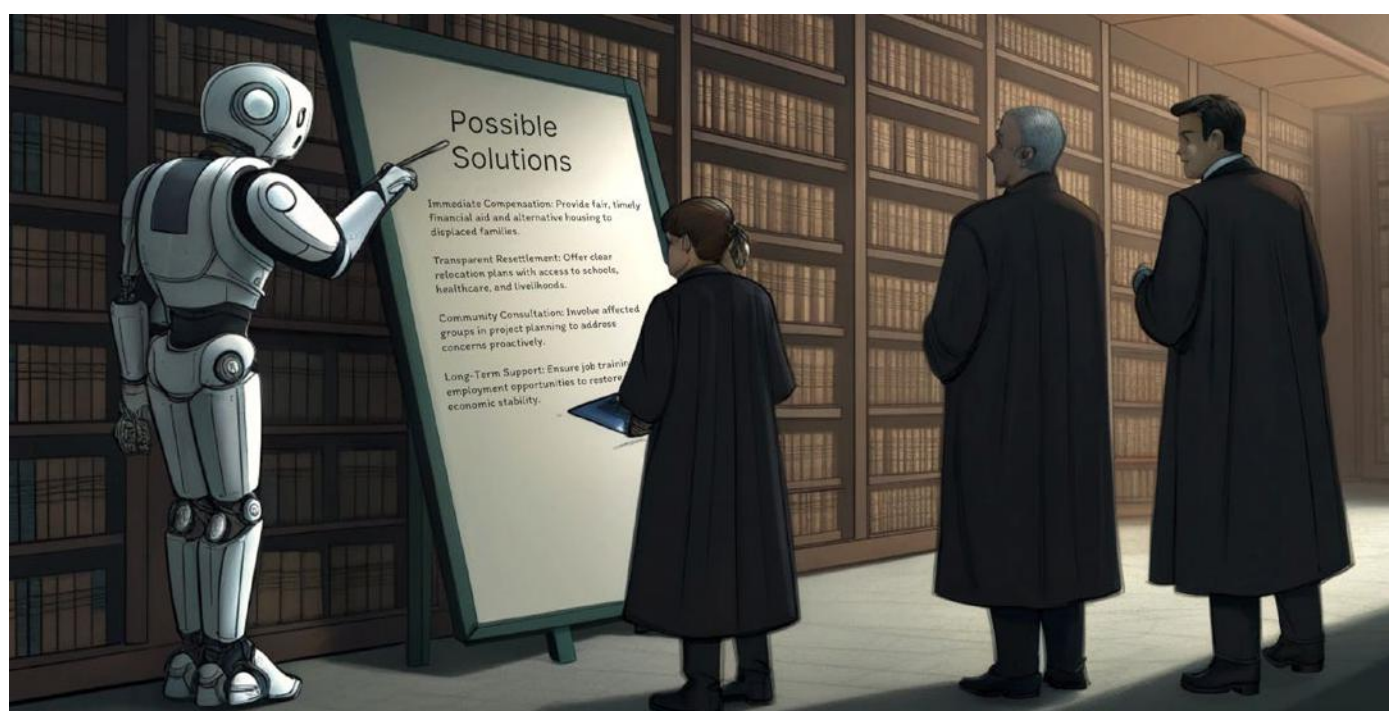
helped spread awareness, the actual impact on voter turnout was limited.

However, we used this experience to refine our approach for the Vidhan Sabha elections. We systematically structured our efforts through existing mechanisms such as:

- **Voter awareness forums:** Ensuring every organisation had a forum to educate employees on voter registration and participation.
- **Booth awareness groups:** Empowering Booth Level Officers (BLOs) to create awareness at the grassroots level.
- **Electoral literacy clubs:** Engaging students in higher education institutions and even 11th-12th graders to build a culture of voting among young voters.
- **Resident welfare associations (RWAs):** Involving local communities to drive participation.

To make voting more relatable and engaging, we leveraged major events in Jamshedpur, such as Indian Super League (ISL) matches and IPL fan parks, to create a buzz around elections.

We systematised all these efforts by creating a structured calendar of activities, assigning officers to monitor implementation, and ensuring accountability. This structured approach led to a 5-6 per cent





Governance doesn't come with fixed KPIs — impact is measured through developmental outcomes, comparative benchmarks, and how effectively you lead in complex, unpredictable conditions

increase in voter turnout, which was a significant achievement.

Ultimately, our success was a result of teamwork — our officers were deeply involved, and the citizens actively participated in the democratic process. The more inclusive and participatory the process, the better the decision-making and impact.

Jamshedpur attracts a large workforce due to its industries. However, there seems to be a significant skill gap between workforce capabilities and industry requirements. What is your approach to bridging this gap?

The government is actively working to address this challenge through initiatives like the Jharkhand Skill Development Council (JSDC), which has empanelled multiple training service providers across 60-plus trades. If there is a demand for specific skills in the district, JSDC facilitates training in those trades to equip individuals with the necessary expertise.

To make this effort more industry-aligned, we are engaging directly with industries in Jamshedpur to understand their specific skill requirements. By collaborating with JSDC and relevant training service providers, we aim to ensure that the workforce is trained in skills that match industry needs.

Additionally, through the industries

department, we are fostering dialogues between employers and training institutions. This approach helps us bridge the skill gap effectively, ensuring that local talent is better prepared for the evolving job market.

Jharkhand, especially East Singhbhum, has a significant tribal population and dense forests. While it's important to preserve their culture and lifestyle, there are also challenges in ensuring access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods. How are you approaching this issue?

You're absolutely right — East Singhbhum has a high tribal population and many remote, hard-to-reach areas, which makes delivering quality education and healthcare a challenge. However, the government is constantly evolving its approach to ensure that essential services reach every citizen.

Education:

- Biometric attendance systems have been installed in schools to ensure both teachers and students attend regularly. Their geolocation is tracked, improving accountability.
- Efforts are being made to enhance the quality of education, not just the reach, by ensuring teacher presence and active participation.

Healthcare:

- The Ayushman Bharat scheme is enabling better healthcare access for underprivileged populations.
- The Mukhyamantri Aspalat Rakh Rakhav Yojana is improving hospital infrastructure and ensuring private doctors contribute to government healthcare services.
- Special initiatives are being taken to bring mobile healthcare units and telemedicine services to remote areas.

Delivering quality services in such regions is a complex challenge, as it's not just about coverage but also about sustaining and improving quality. Our goal is to balance development with cultural preservation, ensuring that communities receive the best possible services while respecting their unique way of life.

If you had to train an MBA student to handle governance challenges for a

Structured thinking from engineering helps me break down complex administrative problems, apply logic, and implement solutions with precision and clarity

week, what key skills would you focus on?

Governance requires a unique blend of leadership, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills. If I were to train an MBA student, I would focus on the following key areas:

1. Leadership & decision-making:

- The ability to take firm yet empathetic decisions under pressure.
- Leading with integrity and responsibility, ensuring the best outcomes for the public.

2. Emotional intelligence & resilience:

- Handling high-pressure situations with composure and clarity.
- Developing the ability to stay objective and make fair decisions despite external pressures.

3. Active listening & stakeholder engagement:

- Understanding issues deeply by listening to different perspectives.
- Engaging with multiple stakeholders — including government bodies, citizens, and organisations — to find effective solutions.

4. Public welfare mindset:

- Unlike the corporate world, governance isn't about profit; it's

about maximising public welfare.

- Analysing policies and decisions through the lens of societal impact rather than financial returns.

If an MBA student learns to think in terms of social welfare, sustainable solutions, and effective governance, they will be well-equipped to navigate challenges in the public sector.

How do you handle leadership challenges when you have limited control over external factors, unlike in a corporate setup where decisions often lead to direct outcomes?

Yes, governance and administration come with numerous external factors that can disrupt plans and decision-making. However, the key is to accept these uncertainties as part of the role and adapt accordingly. Here's how I approach such challenges:

1. Understanding the stakeholders:

Every issue involves multiple stakeholders with different expectations. Identifying and engaging all key players ensures that decisions are balanced and inclusive.

2. Building a strong foundation:

Instead of seeing external challenges as obstacles, I consider them as a part of the baseline reality. If you assume that governance will always be smooth, then external disruptions will feel like setbacks. However, if you factor them into your planning from the beginning, you develop more resilient strategies.

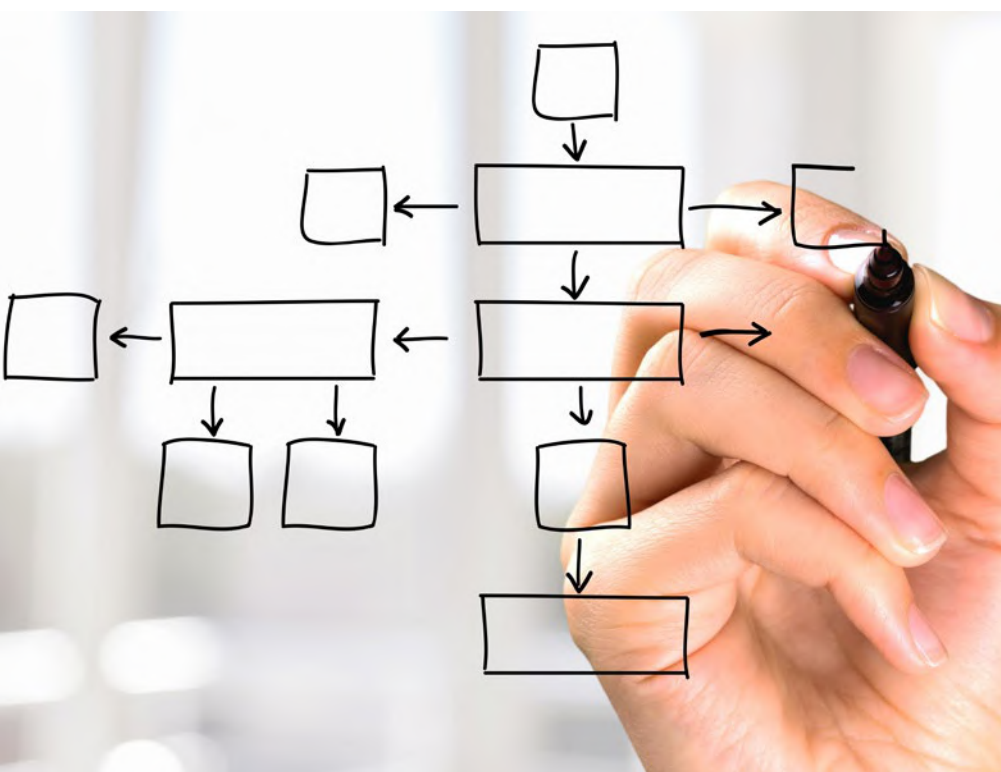
3. Flexibility & adaptive problem-solving:

Unlike the corporate world, where decisions often have immediate and measurable outcomes, governance requires a long-term, iterative approach. Continuous adjustments and stakeholder collaboration help in navigating unpredictable challenges effectively.

By anticipating external disruptions and integrating them into decision-making, governance can become a structured yet flexible process, ensuring better public outcomes despite uncertainties.

In the corporate world, performance is measured through KPIs and metrics. How is performance evaluated for an IAS officer?

Unlike corporate professionals, IAS





To bridge the skill gap, we're aligning training directly with industry needs – turning government skilling programmes into employment-ready pathways

officers do not have fixed quantitative KPIs, but performance is assessed through multiple developmental indicators and comparative analysis. Here's how it works:

1. **Impact on governance & district management:** The ability to lead the district effectively is the core measure of performance, though it is not always easy to quantify.
2. **Developmental scheme indicators:** Each government scheme has specific performance indicators that track progress. The performance of an officer is often reflected in how well these schemes are implemented and their impact on the district.
3. **Comparative benchmarking:** Regular reviews and comparisons are done with other districts and blocks. Higher authorities supervise and assess performance based on key developmental metrics.

If you could introduce one major reform in Indian bureaucracy, what would it be?

With changing times, integrating AI and digital technologies for data analysis and delivery would be a significant reform. It would:

- Enhance decision-making by

providing real-time insights.

- Improve efficiency in governance and public service delivery.
- Enable data-driven policymaking, reducing bureaucratic delays and improving accountability.

Bringing in technology-driven reforms would make governance more transparent, efficient, and citizen-centric.

If you had to give one piece of advice to young professionals — whether in government, business, or social impact — what would it be?

Stay committed and keep going. There are no shortcuts, and hard work is the only key to success.

- **Consistency matters:** Continuously thinking about the task and staying mentally engaged is crucial.
- **Effort itself is valuable:** Many people focus on doing things differently, but simply trying and doing the work sincerely creates an impact.
- **Perception vs reality:** Once something is achieved, people analyse it in hindsight and assume it was done in a unique way. But often, just putting in the effort is enough to make a difference.

So, stay persistent, dedicated, and focused — that's what truly matters. ◀



Twisters by Abraham Aby

1 _____ is an artistic gymnastics vault consisting of a front handspring onto the vaulting table followed by two front somersaults in a tucked position off it. It is considered one of the most difficult vaults in women's gymnastics. Only five women have ever performed it successfully. One of them is an Indian gymnast who was also the first Indian woman to compete in Olympic gymnastics and a recipient of the Padma Shri. Her name is _____.

2 X is a renowned archaeological site located in the Sindh province of Pakistan. The name X literally translates to 'Mound of the Dead'. A Bollywood film by the same name was also released in the past decade.

3 "In this solemn hour of our history, when after many years of struggle we are taking over the governance of this country, let us offer humble thanks to the Almighty Power that shapes the destinies of men and nations, and let us recall in grateful remembrance the services and sacrifices of all those men and women, known and unknown, who with smiles on their faces walked to the gallows or faced bullets on their chests, who experienced living death in the cells of the Andamans, or spent long years in the prisons of India, who preferred voluntary exile in foreign countries to a life of humiliation in their own, who not only lost wealth and property but cut themselves off from near and dear ones to devote themselves to the achievement of the great objective which we are witnessing today."

These words were spoken by Dr Rajendra Prasad during a historic session of the First _____, of which he was the President.

What was the significance of this session?

1. Prodnova, Deepa Karmakar 2. Mohenjodaro 3. Constituent Assembly; Significance: It marked the adoption of the Constitution and India becoming a Republic



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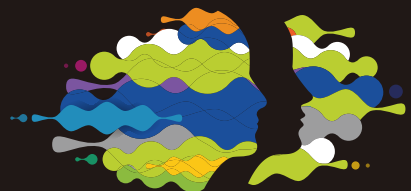
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