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LEADERSHIP

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AJAY SRINIVASAN, chief executive, financial services, Aditya Birla Group

Leadership needs ability to triumph over fears

Nachiket Kelkar

nachiket.kelkar@hindustantimes.com

Ajay Srinivasan, chief executive, financial services, Aditya Birla Group, has over two decades of experience in the industry. Under his leadership, the group's financial services business has grown to over \$20 billion in assets under management. He spoke to HT on various leadership issues and says a successful leader must have foresight and ability to dream. Excerpts:

How do you define a leader?

A leader is one who sets a vision, aligns people around the vision, plans to deliver that vision, and finally ensures that there is delivery against the goals set. A leader is one who has followers, and the followers typically are part of the leader's team because they are inspired by that vision.

What are the key traits of a successful leader?

A successful leader must have foresight and must be able to dream about possibilities. A leader must have a great understanding of what motivates people, and must be able to align and organise resources to deliver results. The biggest challenge in management is the ability to get the things you want through other people. A successful leader is able to know when to dive into details and when to take a helicopter view in getting the things done. Successful leaders are typically excellent decision makers, have a great ability to communicate and are totally grounded with a strong sense

of values. They know they don't always have the answers but they do know what questions need to be asked.

Can leadership be learnt?

Leadership is either innate or must be desired strongly by a person.

How do you groom future leaders in the group?

We have different ways of identifying and grooming

future leaders. While we look at performance and potential in identifying future leaders, we then develop career paths for people who exhibit leadership traits. This includes on the job training. We also put future leaders onto special cross functional projects to see how they work with people and how they deliver results.

There have been a series of financial crises in recent years. What have been your key challenges in driving

the business?

Although, the global financial crisis struck in 2008, it was probably only in 2010 that we felt the full impact in India. In such an environment, one challenge is to keep the focus on the bigger opportunity and to almost see through the fog that seems to envelope you. It is also key that costs are looked at carefully in times like this, as organisations build flab when times are good.

Having seen the financial upheavals, what have been the things you have learnt?

That nothing lasts forever. Good times will follow tough times, just as challenges will emerge when all seems good. Therefore, it is always important to look past the immediate — to think about how to capitalise on opportunities in challenging times, and to think about challenges that might come when the going seems good.

How does a leader like you manage work-life balance?

I have had the good fortune of leading CEOs across 10 markets in a previous role, and across 10 businesses in my current one. I achieve some semblance of balance because I realise that work is an important part of life, but not the only thing that defines my life. For me, investing time

in the other facets of my life be it family, my friends, my interests or my physical and spiritual health, is equally important. I guess once you accept that all these things are important then it is a question of making sure you allocate your time accordingly.

What is your leadership mantra?

Let me use three of my favourite quotes to elaborate this. I have always remembered something I read a long time ago which said, "Vision without action is daydreaming; Action without vision is a nightmare."

I believe that leadership is not about sitting in some ivory tower and only strategising and taking a 30,000 feet view but ensuring delivery, if need be, by rolling up your sleeves.

Nelson Mandela said, "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it."

I think leadership requires that courage and the ability to triumph over fears.

Steve Jobs said, "Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains." For me, leadership is about simplifying things and building focus around these simple things that help achieve goals.



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