

A Leader To Look Up To

Shiv Shivakumar, Group Executive President (Corporate Strategy & Business Development), Aditya Birla Group, considers himself lucky that the first set of leaders he worked with were excellent teachers who saw more in him than he could see in himself. He peppered them with a lot of questions every day — and they patiently taught him a lot. When he made mistakes, they allowed them as learning opportunities.

“Having good first few bosses is crucial to make sense of what you can achieve,” says Shiv.

In this exclusive interview, Shiv, who has been a renowned CEO for half his career and was one of the youngest CEOs in India in 2003, shares keys to effective leadership in the present time and gets candid on some of his big “Aha!” moments.

BY ANKITA SHARMA

Q While many aspects of leadership are timeless, what new skills and mindsets will be needed to lead effectively into the future when “knowing all the answers” is no longer something we can expect of (or require of) modern leaders?

A Leaders of the future will be under more scrutiny than ever before. Communication and presence were always key for leadership, and I think in a hybrid world where leaders communicate on digital platforms, communication will need to be even better.

No company can do things on their own, and one needs to work with the ecosystem. A leader will have to drive effective ecosystem partnerships.



Technology is key today, and a leader will need to get the team to embrace technology in all aspects of running the business. Digitisation is a horizontal platform that will drive collaboration across functions.

I think the days are long over of a leader as a “know-it-all”. Only ignorant leaders will think they know it all; modern leaders need to learn every day, from everyone and in every interaction. They need to find and prioritise time for learning.

Q Decisions made by leaders are frequently subjected to review from those who are not always aware of the underlying intricacies, complexities and choices involved. Do you have some strategies that leaders could use for not internalising or personalising criticism?

A Leaders make decisions in a context at a given point in time. Hindsight is something only auditors and historians can take advantage of, not anyone else. Today, we have successors wasting time

criticising their predecessors. This is counterproductive and doesn't help anyone; in fact, it slows down the organisation.

Leaders owe it to themselves to involve people in decision-making and then explain the decision to key stakeholders. They must always try and do what's right for the organisation and should not view decision-making from a personal angle. As long as a leader does that, they can look at themselves in the mirror and say, “I have done my best”.

In today's social media world, leaders need to know that there will be significant praise and criticism in equal measure. The ability to see criticism as a mirror to reflect on what was done is one approach since it's unlikely that they could change their decision.

Q What would your best advice be for leaders who are under increasing pressure to make smarter and faster decisions at a time when uncertainty abounds?

A Leaders need to get the best available information and data to the table. They can then seek insights from the data and create pessimistic, realistic and optimistic scenarios for the decision they want to take. If one has done that, they can sleep in peace knowing that they have done their best.

Q Regardless of the transformation challenge (for instance, the need for organisations to be more responsive, collaborative, innovative, agile, inclusive, etc.), culture and leadership are said to be the key levers that make or break a change initiative. How can leaders enable a culture transformation initiative that entails changing rituals, habits and behaviours?

A Every organisation has values that are written down on paper, in emails, on posters etc. The first step for leaders is to ensure that the top 10% of managers display behaviour in line with the values. When that is done, employees get a sense of the culture that leadership wants.

Up-Close and Personal

Q While early job experiences may not be the most challenging or monetarily rewarding, they certainly are formative. Could you give us an account of an unforgettable experience at your first corporate job?

A I was lucky that the first set of leaders I worked for were very open to challenge and were excellent teachers. I peppered them with questions every day, and they patiently taught me a lot. I made some mistakes, but my leaders allowed them as learning opportunities.

Having good first few bosses is crucial to make sense of what you can achieve. I have seen that cynics in an organisation invariably had a bad first boss and maybe a bad second boss.

Q Have you experienced an “Aha!” moment that changed you forever?

A Many of us try to be popular bosses as opposed to being respected bosses. Young team leaders feel the need to be liked. I once had a couple working for me who I was fond of. That fondness came in the way of judging a promotion amongst

them. My then boss Mr R Gopalakrishnan came down heavy on me and reminded me that I was a professional manager whose primary responsibility was to do what’s right in a meritocratic company. That was a good aha moment.

Q What’s your most significant learning from the pandemic experience?

A At one level, gratitude, and at another level, I got back to being fitter. I talk to the top 60 managers who work with me every fortnight, and I talk with their families every 6 months on a video call. It is humbling to hear about their family experiences and expectations.

Q What would we be surprised to learn about you?

A Even though I board close to 8 to 10 flights a month, I am a nervous flyer because my dad passed away in an air accident in 1994. Reading up a lot is my way of dealing with this phobia. I have read up about every air accident and every type of plane and airport. To mentally prepare myself for any turbulence, I track the weather of the route I am flying a day before a flight!

A Workday in the Life of a Leader

Q Do you have a morning routine that helps you get a good start on your workday?

A I tend to get up early and exercise; that gives me the energy needed for the day.

Q How do you typically unwind after work?

A I unwind by reading, watching TV and tracking interesting news.

Q What’s your favourite indulgence when you need a break from work?

A Watching sports is a great break. Listening to music is another indulgence.

Q What are some productivity hacks you use to make the most of your workday?

A I maintain a strict calendar and also take copious notes in every meeting. I have always delegated a lot to my executive assistants: Monica Iyer in Nokia and Pepsico and Reena Desai in ABG. They ensure that I am on time and my calendar has the right balance in terms of breaks, corridor walk breaks, etc. Notes help me remember the important stuff.

Culture transformation happens when leaders walk the talk, there can be no better way. The worst thing is to have a leader who indulges in double talk.

Today when a leader says transformation, people get anxious. So every time leaders drive change, they should provide a clear milestone led roadmap and tell people what to expect on the journey. That prepares people better; it doesn’t necessarily take out the anxiety.

Q Leaders have hectic schedules, and self-care often falls by the wayside during the daily grind. What simple self-care practices can leaders use even on their busiest days to restore depleted energy levels?

A I think it’s fair to say that leaders today have more hectic and stressful schedules. They need to be self-disciplined about their habits of exercising, sleeping and finding time for self-reflection.

Good leaders bring DEF to work every day—discipline, energy and focus. A disciplined leader has an advantage, can bring energy if they are physically fit, and must focus on issues where they can make the most impact when they have a lot to do.

Rapid Fire

- Describe the year 2020 in 3 words: Reflective, reimagine, recharge
- Describe the year 2021 in 3 words: Optimistic, future, focused
- What’s the one thing you miss most about pre-pandemic times? The free travel wherever one wanted to go
- Complete these sentences:
 - I strongly believe in ... learning constantly.
 - I’m grateful for ... the opportunities I got.
 - I wish ... I had more time in a day.
- What comes to your mind when you hear these words?
 - Curiosity: is a good thing
 - Resilience: needed in a changing world
 - The future of work: adaptability with technology

Many leaders try to do too many things and hence burn themselves and their teams out.

