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MAKING INDIAN MANAGERS GLOBAL LEADERS

In one of the DDI studies, 62% of the multinational executives described their preparation for their global roles as fair or poor, coupled with this is another data point which states that the second biggest globalization business challenge is demand vs supply of global executive talent.

In the era where India is supposedly one of the major players in fuelling the world economy for next couple of decades, one of the critical strategic levers that it needs in abundance is managers who can act, think and work in a global environment. In order to position itself as a major economic force to reckon with for a foreseeable future, India needs employees who are truly global citizens in its approach and mind-set. This should not be mistaken with superficial aping of only accent, mannerisms (like eating habits), displaying confidence in voice and body language. It actually requires a deeper sensitization and appreciation of softer aspects like collaborating effectively, working and encouraging diversity and inclusion, reciprocating relevance of deadline etc.

The organization's view and capability along with an individual's own inclination and exposure becomes important in creating a pool of global leaders. The young generation coming out of business schools where there is a strong emphasis on cross- cultural awareness harnessed through exchange programs, international faculty and students along with international course content, prepares them to perform global roles in an effective manner. However, a lot of work still needs to be done in the early stages of development as the lessons learnt at this stage usually become guiding principles throughout one's life.

Building on this logic one sees a very high result orientation in Indians which goes in our favor. The need to complete a task quickly, with a sound degree of precision, and against all odds seems to be inbuilt in Indian managers.

This is perhaps also a result of the environment in which a lot of Indian managers have grown up. The area that needs to be immediately addressed is building a higher degree of social and cultural competence in order to co-create long term sustainable value.

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The proverbial “Jugaad” – Indian version of innovation & creativity is deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of our society. The possibility of creating a solution with limited resources, in an ambiguous environment with a race against time (where time is always stretchable) and thousand other activities is one of the finest recipes cooked and served daily in majority of the corporates operating out of India. The positive side is Indian managers usually are unperturbed in a crisis situation the not so positive side is that work done and crisis have become synonymous.

Indian managers are extremely competitive by nature. It has its roots in the competition which is rampant in every sphere of life right from school to college. The reality of 100% cutoff for a course in one of the colleges in the recent past is a testimony to the above statement. The notion of being Number 1 equivalent to being successful and competent is deeply rooted in the psyche of a lot of high potential Indian managers. This mental model is possibly the biggest impediment that organizations need to deal with when they are preparing Indian managers for global roles.

Organizations are trying their level best to crack this code. They are dabbling with a lot of development methods, tools and techniques. Providing exposure, coaching, mentoring, training programs, conferences etc these are some of the methods that are currently being used. The output of this significant investment of time, investment and energy hopefully will pay rich dividends in the coming future.

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Globalization – Changing Importance of geographies

There was a time when western economies of the so called developed nations ruled the roost. In the last decade and a half the emerging markets took a lot of limelight and mind-space in the business world. There was a lot of positive economic sentiment created around the BRIC economies. The growth rates of a lot of big eastern countries has been zooming up, with some plateauing post the global financial crisis. The liquidity flow from the western countries to the emerging markets was one of the major reasons of catapulting growth rates of certain economies including India during the 2003-2007 period. With the changing times, the west has become a lot more risk-averse, in fact few of the European banks/financial institutions are repatriating their capital back because of the issues or problems they are facing back at home.

“Many of the western economies are likely to get more and more closed. They are getting much more into protection zone. Therefore the acceptance of other cultures is not going to be high” –Bimal Rath

“Certain mannerisms and skills are relevant and true for any nationality. May be we are not putting enough efforts to polish our managers better.” – Praneet Mehrish

This can be interpreted as obvious signs of some form of mild protectionism that the west may be forced to adopt and therefore in the long term which part of the world is promising to be, open and egalitarian in its business and economic philosophy is a moot able point. There are some countries that have a strong chance of growing from an economic standpoint, Indonesia & Turkey to name a few. The bigger question to all the people who are creating future HR & Talent strategy is that, are we creating global leaders keeping in mind the demands and opportunities that will unfold with respect to the projected future global economic situations or are we simply going by the rules of the past and in the name of global leaders we are sensitizing High Potential Indian managers on very specific cultures of nations that were economic Goliaths of the past.

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Issues & methods - Developing Indian managers to become global leaders

Organizations understand the need of developing global leaders and therefore have tried a lot of different approaches. Majority of these ones are largely confined to classical methods of classroom training, coaching & mentoring etc. However it is required to first assess whether the individual manager deserves the position he/she currently holds or has he/she reached there by virtue of riding a tide of economic growth and industry boom.

“There are sizeable numbers of HR heads who are themselves exposed to global culture. They should take the lead and go to other institutes and do several forums.” – Rakesh Sharma

The idea of creating more global leaders need to be linked to the long term business strategy and experiential ways of developing Indian managers in this aspect requires a sharp focus. Rotating people in different geographical territories and also being coached by an individual who understands and has handled global portfolio, is perhaps one of the best way of achieving this objective.

“There is a need for business strategy to be in place like it is in some companies. There are many organizations which need to be clear which direction they are headed to identify what they need to do. The other part is exposure which is absolutely crucial. Exposure includes not only mentoring and internal talent development but also pollination.” –Rahul Goswami

In a lot of organizations where HR professionals including HR Heads, are exposed to global ways of working, they will need to don the mantle of being facilitators helping others in the organization to pick up these skills and shaping new mental paradigms that are required in managing the global role effectively. The long term business value of creating global leaders needs to be communicated



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and advocated by HR professionals in different forums within and outside the organizations. The futuristic business need and level of evolution of organizations reflects their efforts in gearing up for this challenge. There are a significant number of organizations who have women leadership forums, their leaders act as mentors or coaches, theme of globalization is talked about and issues addressed in conferences as well as cascaded down to the operational levels.

“There has to be something done by NHRD or business schools, public programs being offered by various organizations etc. This is a big need (developing Indian managers to become global leaders) now, and I am sure any move in this area is welcome.” – Praneet Mehrish

The issue should be addressed at different levels; at one level it is organization specific, where investment of time and effort needs to be highly customized keeping in mind the strategy of the organization. At a larger level complete ecosystem needs to be prepared, that will enable the corporates to deal with this issue in a proactive manner with the basics having already been taken care of. It is the latter part where independent bodies, corporates and academic institutions need to collaborate in some shape or form to devise a robust process of creating at-least a practical base-level development intervention.

Established angularities

Each country has created stereotypes which in a way is the frame of reference through which the outside world looks at it. India is no exception; it has managed to create a strong image of our people as corporate professionals. As it always happens stereotypes do not represent every member of the community however once formed, every member runs the risk of being viewed through the same lens till the time s/he proves it otherwise.

“One of the biggest problems with a lot of Indian manager is that they don’t appreciate healthy competition. They don’t know how to collaborate amongst themselves. They believe in scoring points and don’t realize its consequences.” – Rakesh Sharma



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There exists enough conclusive experiential evidence that Indian managers' influencing capability heavily rests on the subject matter expertise, devoid of this aspect, they find it extremely difficult to persuade or win individuals or groups in their favor without being abrasive or passive. In a world which is now turning out to be truly flat because of technological advancements, professionals have to deal with matrix structures, work in a partner alliance environment etc. The traditional ways of persuading in an Indian context just doesn't seem to work anymore.

*“There is slight bit of over confidence and arrogance that Indian managers reflect and communicate which usually translates into something like **we will manage**” – Rohit Thakur*

Managing and harnessing diversity in the form of gender, generation etc in a way involves building appreciation for a value system which perhaps is contrary to the value system of an average Indian manager working in the middle to senior level of the corporate. One of the latest UNICEF reports on adolescents brings out the values of a majority of adolescents in India with respect to gender treatment. The findings seem to reflect values that can potentially have disastrous consequences if applied in an organizational context with a global outlook.

Indian managers have the ability to manage many things together. The organizations need not focus on trying to change the DNA of Indians because that could be disastrous. Things which are good and strong need to be polished.” – Praneet Mehrish

The Indian orientation towards “time” from a cultural standpoint is flexible; the issue of work getting done takes precedence over the time initially committed to complete a task. This deeply ingrained cultural aspect is a big hindrance in dealing with professional counterparts coming from societies where adherence to deadline is sacrosanct and paramount. This cultural aspect on its own has the potential of tarnishing the professional image of Indian managers.



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“There may not be issues in speed, quality of work, but there are issues around softer aspects of communication, collaboration, understanding cultures, working with other cultures, when we assess Indian managers” –Bimal Rath

The value of respect towards seniors is another area where an Indian manager finds himself/herself in a catch 22 situation. The notion of showing respect many a times gets translated in not saying No to a deadline if it comes from his/her leader. Also, the idea of interpreting expression of a different opinion as an argument and an obvious sign of disrespect towards seniors greatly reduces the chance of an Indian manager being viewed as someone who has the ability of challenging the status quo. Not only this, many a times it earns them a sobriquet of a “Yes Man”.

Strengths & areas of development

Indian managers when compared with their international counterparts usually score pretty high on certain factors like, result orientation, competitive spirit, managing in chaos and of-course pure technical skills. This skillset combined with sudden economic boom of past decade and a half where every major MNC was going gaga about the Emerging Markets story, ensured phenomenal success in the first 10-15 years of their career. However, with the economic scenario now becoming stable and the thrust moving to stabilizing, consolidating or even in few industries expanding the business, the Indian managers require different types of skills, mindset and approach to deal with the present and future requirements. The aspiration and also the demand of the organizations from these managers are to move to the next role which requires global outlook and broader leadership orientation in order to create sustained value from a long term perspective.

“The ability to recognize that each place has its own culture and equally to present to the other side that you have your own cultur, without imposing is a two way process. This ability a lot of Indian managers need to learn.” –Rahul Goswami



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“The biggest problem I have seen with Indian managers especially when the person is SME (Subject Matter Expert), the more a person is an expert the more he lacks some of the softer skills. They are extremely content oriented.” – Vipin Arora

Suddenly, Indian managers find a huge change in the rules of the game. They are now expected to collaborate with different stakeholders, influence without authority, deal with diversity issues, abide by processes and systems, adapt and show appreciation for cultural nuances etc. The idea of being successful is strongly linked to vertical growth in the mind of an average Indian manager. In the past the vertical movements in the operations and even in the tactical domain within the organizational system in a growing economy was possible as it was the perfect match. Organizational requirement from these managers was quick execution using their technical skills, which was a natural strength. Now movement further up in the corporate hierarchy or even increasing the breadth of the role requires demonstration of an entirely new set of values and competencies. Unfortunately the education system, social conditioning as well professional success of initial years becomes the biggest impediment to appreciate and acquire new set of values and competencies and may be to use some of the existing ones in a prudent manner after assessing the context and situation and not because that comes naturally.

“There are individuals who started their careers in typical family owned business house where the founder of the family set the culture and that culture was based on individual not corresponding to the global requirements which are coming up now.” – P.N. Shukla

Another dimension to this whole discussion is the formal years of professional careers of a lot of Indian managers. A significant population of Indian managers started their career in Indian organizations that was led by promoters or family owned. These promoters had a huge influence in creating the overall organizational culture. In many such cases the promoters themselves were not aiming at and even at times not exposed to the global way of doing business and running an organization.



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The organization's culture was literally a shadow of the promoter. The employees across levels emulated the promoter and assimilated the organization's culture. The same set of employees are now being asked to demonstrate an new way of managing and leading either because they have now moved to MNCs or the Indian organizations have now become global in the presence, approach etc.

Conclusion

There is a strong consensus about developing Indian managers to become global leaders.

This is because of several factors like projected futuristic growth of Indian economy, the confidence and enthusiasm of Indian corporates to become global MNCs as well the strong aspiration of Indian Millennials to work outside their home countries (In one of the latest PwC studies 93% of Indian Millennials agreed to work outside their home country during their careers).

The business need and the aspiration of employees makes it evident that sudden focus in developing Indian managers in this area has gained a lot of limelight. The efforts in this area seem to be range from proactive and highly structured to disjointed and superficial. The strong desire of Indian managers to professionally grow and succeed (mostly in a vertical manner) coupled with an equally strong desire to work outside their home country is a positive sign, however to contribute in a meaningful manner as a global leader requires inculcating some new ways of thinking and behaving along with retaining strengths that are considered a hallmark of an Indian manager (in a positive sense). Helping Indian managers to strike this balance while making their presence felt as a top talent in the global arena, will be the most arduous task for HR leaders in the coming years.

The sudden rise of professionals of Indian origin in the upper echelons of the corporate hierarchy (including the CEO position) gives a lot of hope and confidence. However professionals, who have spent a considerable amount of time in India in their formative professional years, have then risen to the top levels in a global firm and have managed to contribute to the organization's growth, are few and far between in the annals of global corporate literature. It is this landscape that will witness a huge change and like with every change there will be moments of chaos and hiccups. The attempt should be to make the landing as comfortable, soft and smooth while all of us witness this imminent transition. This is possible when collectively, proactively and systematically efforts are deployed in this area.