

Indian Leadership Ethos- A Collective view

A group of 12 experienced international coaches of The Global Coaching Partnership representing member firms in Germany, France, UK, Spain, USA, Canada,, Singapore & South East Asia, South Africa, India and Australia met in Chennai early February 2010 ; for most of the executive coaches this was their first visit to India.

All the visitors are coaches with extensive experience working with senior leadership and management teams in their home countries.

As part of the annual learning conference the group met with a cross section of Indians, young and old, business and spiritual, in formal and informal settings, all of them closely associated with business, management and leadership development and all of them with a keen interest and experience in leadership development. The meetings happened on the street while on a heritage tour, in a board room with experienced and enlightened managers and spiritually enlightened leaders, and over lunch, cocktails and dinner (with all of the international coaches hugely enjoying the food and not suffering any untoward consequences!!!)



THE GLOBAL COACHING PARTNERSHIP TEAM IN CHENNAI

THE CONTENTS OF AND CONCEPTS IN THIS ARTICLE ARE PROPRIETARY TO THE AUTHOR UNLESS MENTIONED OTHERWISE IN THE BODY. THE AUTHOR WOULD BE HAPPY TO PROVIDE PERMISSION FOR USE ON A NON COMMERCIAL BASIS BASED ON A WRITTEN REQUEST.

The group reflected on their impressions and learnings at the conclusion of the 5 day conference. Their collective view of the great strengths that India possesses, the visible challenges, the glaring opportunities and subtle pitfalls ahead, is the substance of this article.

India's long history of philosophical enquiry is seen as a central component of leadership development, enabling a calm, collected approach to life and business. The innate spirituality helps develop a vibrant psyche; deeply held religious beliefs provide a dynamic orientation reflective of the open nature of India's religiosity. In practical terms this background translates into an instinctive, if not intuitive sense of entrepreneurship, as it encourages exploration of the unknown. In a globalizing world the effect is a demonstrated ability to manage contradictions, great cultural shifts and subtle transitions.

The people came across, uniformly, as warm, and hospitable. This friendly disposition, combined with a natural curiosity and sprit of enquiry, sets up a sound base to develop talent. This openness and awareness of world events gives the young, upwardly mobile a good grasp of global issues and business. The relatively outspoken and straight forward temperament makes for easy conversation and a potential to establish partnerships easily. Actual communication, though, can be challenging given that some accents are hard to understand, the speed of delivery difficult to comprehend, and some of the grammar difficult to grasp.

The visible and chaotic diversity makes India an exciting place to work as the ferment is palpable all round- in airports, in hotel lobbies, on the street, in discussions, at work and in the intellect. Despite this setting being contrary to the European and American ethos, India and Indian seem to align easily with western values, link comfortably (unlike China), to western thinking and bond readily with Western culture, at a broad level.

India has a long and successful history of institution building and institutionalized learning. There is a tangible sense of solidity in the immense curiosity to question, to learn, to share, to argue that gives the westerner a sense of confidence, if not comfort, that an enduring organization can be built.

This sense of history together with long held and often institutionalized beliefs and the ability to survive trying times without losing a sense of spirituality, makes India a great alternative to a culturally aseptic China as a business location. The additional, and possibly more significant, advantage India has over China is the depth of managerial experience and quality of established leadership. The entrepreneurial flair when combined with these leadership traits makes India a country with huge potential for the next quarter of a century.

However, for this potential, that has been visible for the last 15 years, to be realized, India and Indians need to assess, appraise and improve some correctable difficulties. For example:

- ✓ While the aspirations can be global, the thinking modern, and the belief systems rooted in spirituality, the transformation has to be current and relevant to changing times and emerging opportunities.
- ✓ The curiosity and openness is translating into high attrition rates, which will slow down productive growth and organized effort.
- ✓ Decision makers are not always keen on learning and there are indications of a need for more maturity in argument, more confidence in reflection, and greater humility in the approach to learning.
- ✓ Middle managers seem more compliant than required for the good of the organisation; the intent is to please through agreement rather than through the delivery of results.
- ✓ Yet, at the same time, it can appear to be a throbbing democracy that is unable to reach a consensus; the diversity and cultural differences interfering adversely.
- ✓ The focus often seems to be more on control than management, with a preference for directive behavior rather than dialogue and group think. The entrepreneurial streak seems to limit, and may even be interfering with, the ability for successful team work. The diversity essential to constitute a good team is latent but the individuality that can become restrictive, especially as India becomes successful, seems dominant.
- ✓ Indians come across as skilful bargainers but are they quality negotiators? Are they seeing the trees instead of the woods? There is a sense of aversion to risk that is disconcerting when judged by the daily overdose of risks from manic traffic and forgettable road manners.
- ✓ The ability to accept chaos and thrive on it is commendable, but the sense of acceptance of chaos as the inevitable norm can hinder improvement and innovation.
- ✓ The cultural differences are many and could manifest in subtle, negative ways, especially under stress. The learning needs to be structured and systemized a lot more than the current 'spread-the-seed-wide-harvest-will-be-bountiful' approach. The rigid social structures could add a further degree of difficulty in the absence of more complete approaches to learning.

The general sense is of an intellectually aggressive people with a naturally passive behavior, one where hierarchies seem to be more important than meeting commitments, and where speed of delivery has very little premium.

All these characteristics would require the leadership of western firms to learn to be more patient with their Indian entities, more intrusive in the decision making and more directive in their management styles.

THE CONTENTS OF AND CONCEPTS IN THIS ARTICLE ARE PROPRIETARY TO THE AUTHOR UNLESS MENTIONED OTHERWISE IN THE BODY. THE AUTHOR WOULD BE HAPPY TO PROVIDE PERMISSION FOR USE ON A NON COMMERCIAL BASIS BASED ON A WRITTEN REQUEST.

Modern India needs to integrate its pragmatic legacy on leadership, its long held and carefully nurtured diversity and its unequalled experience of, and in, institutionalized learning, to overcome some of its limiting behaviours and self defeating characteristic. Backed by more organized and results oriented learning, the next twenty five years can bring great prosperity to its people and the world at large.

For India to perform to expectation Indian managers have to transform and shift their preoccupation with process driven routine and control oriented management to results based, customer centric leadership. There is a pressing need to let go of a developing hubris and overconfidence.

India and Indians need to develop a sensitivity to the dynamics of the market, recognize that competition is global, and be dominated by an appetite for customer friendly, outcome driven execution.

India stands at a threshold of providing inclusive leadership to the 21st century world.

*Compiled and Edited by Ram,
MD Change Partnership Singapore
A member of TGCP*

The Global Coaching Partnership, (TGCP) is an established member organization of leading national Executive Coaching firms currently represented in 9 countries in 5 continents. The member firms have shared values, common high standards of professionalism and well established practices which enable us to work successfully with leading global organizations at the highest level.

In more than 10 years together TGCP has successfully managed cultural diversity as well as the complexity of a global presence in the most important markets and have built business on it to become a premium provider of international executive coaching

More than 75 professional and highly experienced coaches are located in many of the major business centres, specialising in empowering leaders and helping them accelerate business results. Our coaches all have strong business credentials as well as professional coaching qualification.