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SEIZING THE MOMENT— LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCES

I will begin with the importance of learning from experience. It is less important, I believe, where you start. It is more important how and what you learn. If the quality of the learning is high, the development gradient is steep; and given time, you can find yourself in a previously unattainable place.

—N. R. Narayana Murthy,
*Chief Mentor, Chairman, Infosys Technologies*¹

This is a tumultuous time for Indian businesses. For those aspiring to be tomorrow's business leaders, the challenges ahead are formidable. Globalization is creating intense pressures on leaders worldwide and redefining what is demanded of them. This force is also keenly felt in India, where the country's top business leaders tackle thorny, yet promising opportunities for business growth daily. This book proposes pathways for future top executives to prepare themselves, by learning to use experiences to become ever more effective as leaders.

No longer is it wise to depend solely on leadership programs and formal coursework. Aspiring leaders must learn continuously, which is why there is so much power in learning to learn from experience. Most of us spend the bulk of our lives and most of our daily hours at work. Every type of experience teaches specific leadership lessons. But which experiences carry the most lessons? And what are the lessons that are most

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important to learn to succeed as a business leader in India? Fundamental answers to these important questions are found in the pages of this book.

We start with two real-life stories that show just how much impact work experiences have on shaping the manager's ideas and actions. The stories describe assignments undertaken by Mr. Parikh and Mr. Venkat. (The names are pseudonyms but the stories are true.) Each was at the forefront of creating change, and through his experience, learned much about leading.

Then you are presented with an *Opportunity Matrix* (see table 1.1) and the schematic *Seven Experiences, 11 Lessons: Pathways to Leader Development* (see figure 1.1). Each displays the knowledge generated by the study in formats that can be used easily by leaders and potential leaders. Based on interviews with more than a hundred senior executives from Indian business organizations, the Opportunity Matrix showcases how experiences are learning opportunities and links managers' experiences with the lessons they learned. The good news is that different experiences teach different lessons, and from many different experiences, many leadership lessons can be learned.

For readers who prefer a bird's-eye view, *Seven Experiences, 11 Lessons* provides a structure for developing tomorrow's Indian business leaders today. This schematic maps to the content in the book chapters and further simplifies the information in the Opportunity Matrix. If you are preparing yourself or others to be a leader, both the table and the figure pinpoint what the research tells us about the leadership abilities and skills that are the most important to develop, and the experiences from which you can source them.

As background, and for readers who are interested, I will briefly review the research project. Additional details about the study are included in the appendix. The chapter concludes with notes on how readers, like you, can best use the book to develop leadership in yourself and others.

STORIES OF EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Here are two stories that illustrate how experiences generate learning. (As noted, pseudonyms are used in these and all the stories that follow. References to places and people have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewees and their companies.) In the first story, Mr. Parikh tries to change the ingrained attitudes of employees. He does so successfully. In the second story, Mr. Venkat challenges conventional notions of how to do business and rapidly increases the sales of his company's product. More important than their successes however, are the ways in which Mr. Parikh and Mr. Venkat develop as leaders—readying themselves for further growth.

Making Change Simple

Gokul Parikh was assigned to manage a factory that was facing problems on every front: operating expenses were exorbitant, outdated technologies were in use, workers completely lacked quality consciousness, union leaders often stirred up discontent, and productivity levels were abysmal. Despite agreement among top management that this factory could be a true asset to its company, conditions had continued to deteriorate for several years, and the idea of closing the operation started to gain momentum.

Mr. Parikh realized that even if the factory were to close, he and his management team would not lose their jobs because they would be absorbed elsewhere in the company. But he could not see his team or himself simply shrugging their shoulders and walking away. The team decided to turn the operation around.

Despite the history of contentious relationships with union leaders, Mr. Parikh confided in them and asked that they join his team's efforts to prevent the factory closing. They were

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unresponsive. “*Thik hai*, try your luck,” they said, choosing to neither support nor oppose the team. So, after informed discussions, Mr. Parikh and his team opted to talk with the workforce directly. They pointed out that if productivity improved, the economy of that factory-based township would improve, the employees and their families would prosper; and the region’s downward spiral toward poverty would halt.

Perhaps the workforce sensed that the management team had a sincere purpose. Or perhaps they were won over by their honest, transparent communications. They backed up the management team’s plan of action completely. What they did not know was that the team had thoroughly analyzed the issues and determined the cause of the very low productivity. Absenteeism, exceeding 20 percent, was rampant! Key employees would simply not come to work—sometimes because they were not interested in earning more, and at other times because they were chasing other sources of income. With key employees absent, neither the machinery nor the factory ever operated properly. But if absenteeism could be brought down to 5 percent for just 12 months, productivity and quality would shoot up, costs would come down, and in Mr. Parikh’s words, “the factory would look very, very good.” Moreover, the team figured out that after a year, they could use a clause in the Industries Act and apply for a license to expand the factory by 25 percent; the bigger and better factory would then offer more jobs and create better economic conditions for the region.

So Mr. Parikh’s team focused on controlling absenteeism. Their plan was stunning in its simplicity. Labor traveled to the factory from scattered regions. The management decided to organize 40–50-person groups by region. Each group would be handed a doable objective: “Make sure your neighbor comes to work every day.” This was not complicated or difficult to understand. After each worker made sure that his or her neighbor came to work, his or her responsibility would end. He or she could be satisfied that he or she had been given an objective

and achieved it. The team prepared its campaign and went to the workers.

After a two-month pilot, the campaign lasted for 12 months. The results were amazing: absenteeism fell below 6 percent and production grew from 75 percent to 125 percent of target. “You couldn’t believe it was the same factory as 12 months ago,” said Mr. Parikh, “and the effects were long lasting. After that, absenteeism never went back to the earlier levels!”

In retrospect, Mr. Parikh’s main lesson learned was that even very complex issues can have simple solutions:

I think our team was able to create this unity of purpose and also simplify the whole purpose. We didn’t get into productivity and efficiency calculations. We set a very simple target that each team of 40–50 people would have to make sure that everybody came to work everyday. Employees realized that their families and they would benefit, since the growth of their factory would lead to the growth of their township.

Mr. Parikh believes that success came because the team’s superordinate goal secured communitywide involvement. The workers were able to see that if they produced less, they would earn less. But if they succeeded at changing that, there would be better times ahead for everybody. Large-scale change, in this case, hinged on a simple idea that opened up a big change in workforce attitudes.

Business as Unusual

Bala Venkat headed up a sales territory of several districts, and was assigned to sell a product that was new at the time: compact fluorescent lamps (CFL). His company had a state-level contract for city lighting, and during an incidental conversation with state politicians, he was advised to consider using rural women’s self-help groups to increase the sales volume of his

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new product. This seemed like a wild idea, but Mr. Venkat was willing to explore further. The door was opened for him to make a presentation to one of the more aggressive district collectors. The district collector (DC) was able in turn to introduce him to the rural women leaders who were anchoring social improvement work in the villages.

Mr. Venkat recognized that the politicians had a stake in addressing their state's enormous power shortage. Meanwhile, the DC had a development agenda for the villages. From Mr. Venkat's presentation, the politicians and the DC could see how 1 megawatt of power and 60 lakhs (a lakh is 100,000 rupees) could be saved annually per 50,000 CFLs sold. The DC also saw that the energy-saving campaign could become a part of the self-help agenda that the women's groups were already implementing with their literacy and cleanliness campaigns. On his part, Mr. Venkat saw an opportunity for the women to be a sales force for his company and become economically self-sufficient too.

The campaign scored many firsts. Schemes had to be created and details worked out. A sales force of 1,200 women was started. They were given sales commissions, with many earning money for the first time. They learned to do house-to-house demonstrations to compare ordinary bulbs with CFL lamps, using a kit developed by Mr. Venkat. A financial partner stepped forward to invest in the project by extending credit to the women for their initial purchase of the CFL lamps from Mr. Venkat's company. Passbooks were printed and issued so that each woman could record purchase and sale transactions. Mr. Venkat became completely involved, working alongside the women to watch the way they worked. From this, a quota of 48 lamps per saleswoman per monthly sales cycle was set, and a baseline for sales was established.

The campaign succeeded in unexpected ways, to the satisfaction of the women, the DC, the state's politicians, and Mr. Venkat and his company's top managers. His team was

recognized at an international companywide quality competition and achieved a first place for the Asia-Pacific region. Several years later, when many more well-established multinational companies arrived on the scene, they flocked to learn how women's self-help groups could be deployed.

"Selling through a self-help group of women was a very wild idea," said Mr. Venkat. He emphasized that for breakthrough achievements, it was not always necessary to follow existing processes. New, unconventional ways could be worked out. But people, and your relationships with people, made a difference; and good ideas from your stakeholders had to be used, so that there was a combined effort to meet different agendas.

The experience had enormous personal impact on Mr. Venkat too. He resonated with the strong passion of the DC, who, quoting Nehru, asserted that "the life of India is in its villages." Mr. Venkat was humbled and moved by the enthusiasm of the women's self-help groups. He said:

See, basically the women had no idea of the product or anything, they had no experience of selling, and they were not highly trained or educated. But they were eager because this was something new, and they felt that it is good for the country and good for them also to earn something. One of the ladies showed me the house-to-house demonstration they developed—switching between the two kinds of bulbs, and then going to read the meter the next day to show the energy savings. The ladies knew that "seeing is believing." I learned a lot from them.

Mr. Parikh and Mr. Venkat's experiences are only two of more than 300 experiences collected by interviewing senior Indian business executives. The lessons they learned are part of an extensive array of more than 500 leadership lessons. The following Opportunity Matrix synthesizes what we learned from interview analysis.

THE OPPORTUNITY MATRIX

The purpose of the Opportunity Matrix is to simplify the complex phenomenon of executive development without being simplistic. Several hundred stories were narrated by the senior business leaders. The variety of experiences and nuggets of leadership wisdom gleaned from their stories have been distilled into this matrix. We found that seven kinds of experience and 11 lessons, derived from those experiences, were described the most frequently. At CCL, we find it useful to cluster lessons into those related to leading self, leading others, and leading the business. The value of this model will be discussed in the final chapter.

An important caveat: managers' rich experiences at work and in life, and what is learned from experiences, cannot be encapsulated in a table with 11 rows and seven columns even when the table is derived from rigorous analysis. For example, our distillation of the data indicates that *confidence* can be learned from *bosses and superiors*, *turnarounds*, and *new initiatives*; but *confidence* is also boosted by other experiences. Similarly, according to our analysis, college graduates start to form *personal leadership insights* based on impressions collected on their *first professional job*; obviously however, a *first professional job* yields new learning on many fronts.

SEVEN EXPERIENCES, 11 LESSONS: PATHWAYS TO LEADER DEVELOPMENT

Based on a landmark study that uses a proven methodology and breaks new ground, *Seven Experiences, 11 Lessons* organizes essential findings so that busy leaders and managers can quickly access what they need to know about experiences and the leadership lessons they produce. "YOU" refers to the manager who is at the hub or center of experiences that fan out in front of him or her. The seven pathways of experience radiate, summoning managers to different courses of action. Past-generation managers have traveled along these paths,

Table 1.1 Opportunity Matrix: Experiences and leadership lessons learned

Leadership lessons learned → ↓	Experiences						
	Bosses and superiors	Creating change: Turnarounds	Creating change: New initiatives	Horizontal moves: job rotations and transitions	Cultural crossings	Increases in job scope	First professional job
Leading self							
Confidence	X	X	X				
Self-awareness		X	X				
Personal leadership insights	X						X
Leading others							
Managing and motivating subordinates	X					X	
Developing subordinates	X						
Navigating politics and gaining influence			X				
Engaging with multiple stakeholders				X			
Cross-cultural savvy					X		
Leading the business							
Effective execution	X	X					
Innovation and entrepreneurship			X				
Functional and technical expertise			X	X		X	

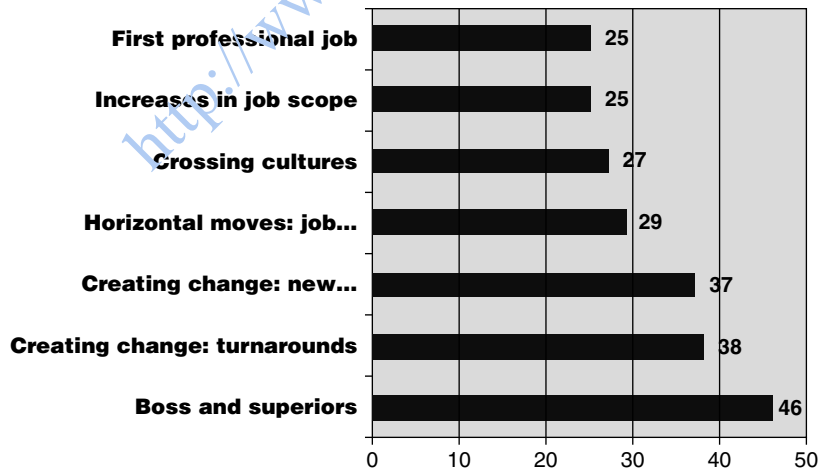


Figure 1.1 Seven Experiences, 11 Lessons: pathways to leader development

learning imperative leadership lessons, and today's managers are invited to do so too. This array of 11 lessons has been carefully sifted from the detailed accounts given by the veteran leaders participating in the study.

The concept of *lokasamgraha*—variously translated from Sanskrit as “welfare of the world,” “holding together the people,” and “service to society”—arcs around the circumference. (Cognate words for *loka* are world, people, and society; and for *samgraha* are welfare, trusteeship, and service.) The desire to situate managerial work within the larger scheme of life goals and purpose is an implicit theme in the lives of Indian managers. The spirit that Indian business leaders bring to their undertakings resonates with *lokasamgraha*, which is a strong undercurrent in the Indian ethos.² This element of the schematic is introduced here and will be elaborated in the last chapter. The schematic itself is a high-level view; details and nuances are explained in chapters 2 through 8.

Note that there is a logical sequence in which the experiences are discussed (see figure 1.2). The experiences that were more frequently discussed in the interviews are presented first.



**Figure 1.2 Seven essential experiences
(based on percentage of interviewees who reported
each experience)**

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For example, since 46 percent of Indian managers learn leadership lessons from their bosses, in comparison with 37 percent learning lessons from new initiatives, the chapter on bosses precedes the one on new initiatives.

HOW INDIAN BUSINESS EXECUTIVES LEARN AND DEVELOP: LAUNCHING THE INVESTIGATION

To explore what and how executives learn, we interviewed more than 100 senior-level Indian business leaders (see tables 1.2 and 1.3). Our interviewees were selected from eight Indian companies that have established themselves globally. These companies were intentionally chosen to represent various industries (manufacturing, banking and financial services, pharmaceuticals, and conglomerates) with organizational headquarters in all four corners of India.

From the senior executives, we heard stories of their first professional experience, promotions, transfers, special assignments and profoundly personal events. They shared their reflections on what they had learned, and how they had changed, on their way to becoming a successful leader in corporate India. By listening to, transcribing, and analyzing the rich narratives that they generously provided, the research team³ was able to home in on the experiences that had enabled the executives to climb to the pinnacle of their careers and to

Table 1.2 Interviewees' seniority

<i>Level</i>	
President	9
CEO, MD, Dy. MD	10
Sr. VP, Exec VP, VP	13
COO, CE	9
SBU Head, Director	11
Sr. GM, Dy. GM, GM, AGM	19

Table 1.3 Demographics

Gender	No. of companies: 8
Male: 68	
Female: 3	
Age	Industry sectors
< 50 yrs:39	• Manufacturing
> 50 yrs:32	• Financial services
	• Pharmaceuticals
	• Conglomerate
Work experience	
> 15 years	

run businesses in India. The insights obtained from these corporate leaders about their paths of learning and growth are fascinating and instructive.

To gather their lessons of experience, we asked two questions:

- Looking back over your career, what are the three key events or experiences that had a lasting impact on you and influenced how you lead and manage today?
- What did you learn from these events or experiences?

The chapters offer you stories and quotations containing the practical wisdom that came from these top business leaders in response to our questions.

USING THE BOOK

This book is meant for men and women of action, such as yourself. If you are reading these words, either you wish to make progress on your own leadership journey or you wish to help others to go forward on theirs.

We all love stories. Our lives are full of stories or narratives of events that we have observed or experienced.⁴ Of course, stories are colored by the storyteller's memory, powers of

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observation, projections, and imagination. Entertaining, instructional, juicy, factual, or persuasive—stories construct the way we view our world. Stories, revolving around major events in their career, are at the heart of managers' lives too.

In this book, the stories told by interviewees are used as vehicles for traversing the landscape of managerial careers in India-based global companies. For each of us, our own experiences are without doubt the best teacher. As Swami Vivekananda reminds us, "Knowledge can only be got in one way, the way of experience; there is no other way to know."⁵ But for those on their way to becoming business leaders, these stories are a helpful way to absorb the hard-won lessons in leadership that today's senior business leaders have accrued from their lifetimes of experience.⁶

(Parenthetically, please note that my choice to represent the research accurately has limited the content of this book in some ways. For example, there are insufficient stories about senior women leaders. Moreover, my focus is on high-performing managers in general, not on the high-profile Indian business leaders who are repeatedly in the media spotlight with their doings and misdoings. Finally, if there is a leadership lesson that is not highlighted, that is because that lesson was not highlighted in the interviews.)

Each chapter calls on you to improve yourself as a leader. By reading the many stories and quotations, you are immersed in depth and vicariously in the lives of other leaders. The central lessons embedded in their experiences are described in detail too. This will ignite your own memories and provoke you to reflect more deeply on what your experiences have taught you. Frameworks are given and questions are asked to guide your introspection. A self-assessment is included to give you information about how well you have mastered a leadership lesson. You can then use the suggestions that follow to plan a course of action for self-improvement. We recommend that you start a log and write notes to

yourself, because this will become a valuable journal documenting your leadership journey.

These pages offer a nontraditional perspective on the nuts and bolts of leader development. Grounded in four decades of research knowledge and practical experience with developing leaders, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL[®]) view is that the artistry of effective leadership unfolds over time and calls for a different kind of hard work. This is the work of going inward to reflect on one's experiences, thoughts and feelings, what is being learned, and how the learning can be applied. The stories, frameworks, and exercises are all directed toward giving you inklings about who you want to be as a leader.

Recently, I read Gurcharan Das' aptly titled treatise *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*. I was struck by the extent to which the CCL perspective mirrors, as one example, Yudhishtira's leadership journey as told in the epic *Mahabharata*. This prince and ruler conscientiously struggled to be an effective leader, while remaining true to his own *dharmic* commitments. Here is a man who reflected on his experiences, values, and the counsel given him by others at every step.⁷

We expect that your reflection and note taking will be followed by your joining a small group of like-minded others, or even one other person, in meaningful conversations. The purpose of your multilogue or dialogue will be to cross-examine personal perspectives and opinions more objectively, and to share leadership expertise among a community of practitioners.

I believe that this book can especially benefit three groups of readers:

- Ambitious and tenacious young managers who aim to develop themselves and become effective and successful as leaders will find a roadmap for steering their careers. The knowledge shared in these pages can help them drive their

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way forward, through the managerial ranks and into the echelons of executive leadership.

- Senior executives aiming to develop the next rung of leaders can use this book as a springboard to form a sensible plan for cultivating future leaders. For many top leaders, a plan to develop the next generation of leaders has become a strategic necessity. A demonstrated commitment to developing leadership talent enables organizations to attract and retain the top talent who will steer their business in the future.
- All global executives (of both Indian and non-Indian firms operating in India) will be better prepared to form an HRD strategy and adjust their approach to leadership development in India. Any manager who is responsible for selecting and developing managers to work in India, or must work across cultures with Indian counterparts, will learn about how leadership is exercised in the Indian context. This book is not just for Indian managers; it is also about managing in India.

The leadership skills needed for tomorrow need to be cultivated today. The demand for high-caliber leaders, dispersed across levels and throughout an organization's global operations, clearly exceeds the supply. What compounds the supply–demand gap is the complexity of running large global businesses. This supply–demand gap challenges organizations to tackle leader development systematically and intentionally. Fortunately, there is a leader development curriculum that can quicken the maturation of managers into leaders. That curriculum is based on linking experiences to leadership learning. The knowledge to do so is available. In the words of the futurist and sociologist Alvin Toffler, “As we advance into the terra incognita of tomorrow, it is better to have a general and incomplete map, subject to revision and correction, than to have no map at all.”⁸

ENDNOTES

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