

HR's new agenda

Reflections on what HR needs to do in a world that's changing rapidly

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It was around 8 a.m. on Friday, November 28 this year, and the organisers of the 12th National HRD Network's conference in Chennai were besieged by phone calls from participants wanting to know if the conference was on and from speakers announcing their inability to make it either because they could not get out of Mumbai due to the terror attacks or did not want to come to Chennai because of the heavy rain and consequent flooding. All this was in addition to the challenges that the economic slowdown posed to organising a national conference of this magnitude, the planning for which had commenced a year ago. Over the course of a year of planning and preparation, so much seemed to have changed!

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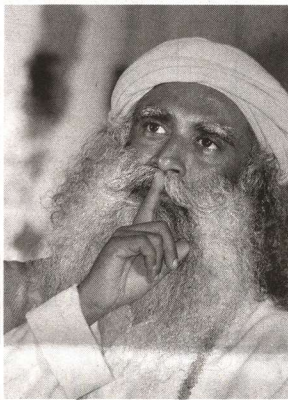
Sitting there at the conference, as one of the speakers, it dawned on me that these changes had to do not so much with the world being flat, but a lot to do with the world becoming somewhat crooked. Crookedness had destroyed global economics as well as our citizens' sense of well-being.

Back at the conference, all the speakers included myself were speaking on themes determined months ahead and making presentations prepared weeks ahead.

While most of the sessions and speeches were extremely well made and well appreciated, there was a lingering sense of meaninglessness that was engulfing me right through.

There was a sense that these great concepts and ideals, worthy by themselves, seemed so powerless in the face of the mammoth challenges that all of us are facing. The spontaneous references to the global economic conditions and the national events by the speakers and the questions from the audience on the same subjects reflected this same sense of powerlessness as well as the deep preoccupation in their minds.

In the midst of all these troubling thoughts, some 'out of the box' perspectives began to emerge in the two evening sessions of the conference. On the first evening, Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, yogi, mystic and visionary, who spoke about 'inner transformation', asked the HR leaders how they could develop others if they could not develop their own inner self and their humanness. Similarly, Gurucharan Das, management thinker and writer, who spoke about the future of India on the second day of the conference, concluded that Indians would certainly become a lot wealthier but also a lot less happy and pointed to the worrying issues of governance in the country.



Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev: Work towards 'inner transformation'. — R. Shivaji Rao

To me, these two perspectives seemed a lot closer to the issues at hand.

GOING BEYOND HR

As I reflect on the theme of the conference — 'HR's next agenda' — and on all the ideas and thoughts shared at the conference and, more importantly, reflect on the context in which the conference had to succeed, I am convinced that HR's next agenda will have to go beyond HR. Let me explain!

HR is a multi-disciplinary field and has evolved through contributions from diverse disciplines and sciences. The concepts, frameworks, processes, tools and techniques have all been distilled from these diverse disciplines to make them useable knowledge. Over the years, innovations have focused on making these processes, frameworks and tools more effective.

However, the recent global events seem to tell me that some of these tools, techniques and methods have been so ineffective and so out of sync with emerging realities. How else would you explain the fact that the world's best corporations, with the most sophisticated leadership processes, state-of-the-art performance management systems and well-defined bonus and reward programmes as well as well-documented business conduct frameworks, failed to prevent the new levels of crookedness that we are witness to.

While we have succeeded in creating great talent pipelines and have in the bargain fuelled the aspirations of thousands of young

minds, we have no solutions to engage this pipeline when there is no one waiting at the end of the pipe.

While we went out and created engagement models that gave our employees all that they did not ask for, we do not seem to have built enough of a relationship to deliver bad news in these tough times.

DRAWING ON SOCIOLOGY, HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY

The new HR agenda must therefore emerge from a contemporary understanding of sociology. We must understand the new societal norms and values in action, the impact of new family structures and family values, the emerging challenges of inclusion and diversity and the rapid urbanisation trends. We must ensure that our HR policies and programmes are built on these new insights.

The new HR agenda must be built on the most current understanding of human psychology. Given our focus on talent development, we must understand the rapidly emerging field of positive psychology which focuses on helping people realise their true potential.

Our talent development strategies should be based on this body of knowledge. The new HR agenda must of course take into account economics, migration of capital and labour and the larger economic and human implications of globalisation.

Given the levels of greed and distress, the new HR agenda must incorporate a significant number of spiritual lessons because the way we choose to live our lives will significantly impact the way we work in our organisations. India has a wealth of insights in this area that are waiting to be explored.

As a first step, we must open our doors to practitioners from these fields and start listening to their points of view so that we see the complete picture. It is my hope that in the next NHRD conference, sessions on talent management, leadership and so on are scheduled for the evening slot and sessions on sociology, economics and positive psychology are scheduled for the morning. In closing, I must compliment NHRD for making a great beginning in this direction and, more importantly, for pulling off the event against all odds.

(The writer is the founder and CEO of totus consulting, a strategic HR consulting firm. He is also the co-founder of the Executive & Business Coaching Foundation India Ltd. He can be reached at ganesh@totusconsulting.com)

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