



Servant Leadership: Leading With Vulnerability In a VUCA World

Vishal Naithani is a People & Culture evangelist with a personal drive to create amazing workplaces by advocating progressive people practices. He was previously the Head of HR for Shuttl where he built and scaled the function from ground-up. In his earlier stints he has also worked with Xerox India Ltd, Sapient Consulting and Essar wherein he donned multiple hats within the HR function. His keen areas of interest are Organisational Culture, Leadership Development, Talent Management, Organisational Behaviour and Employer Branding. He has 12 years of rich experience post his MBA from MDI, Gurgaon and is fascinated by People & Culture challenges across organisations.

Vishal Naithani in a candid conversation with All Things Talent, shares his professional journey so far and discusses the tenets of Servant Leadership. He also shares some valuable insights on how D&I can become the catalyst for innovation to remain competitive and agile in the unsteady world of VUCA.

JOURNEY

Q Having worked as an HR leader for MNCs and start-ups for many years, how has this journey been so far? What were your main challenges when you started out? How did that help you evolve into a leader?

A It has been a super-exciting, somewhat unconventional journey where I have been lucky to experience the best of both ends of the spectrum. Every-day brings forth some unique people challenges and is a journey of self-discovery while devising new people interventions. I've been a keen observer of behaviours and



patterns and deciphering human psychology always seemed to be a chimera of sorts. Both good and bad experiences teach you a lot and become an integral part of your learning journey. Luckily, by the virtue of my role, I spend a lot of time with people and have seen successful leaders owe their success to the following few traits that I try and emulate.

Empathy: Research and experiences prove that empathy is the secret ingredient contributing to the gold leadership standard. Successful leaders have a high EQ and lead from the heart.

Being Personally Invested in Your Team: A purely transactional relationship will never evolve into a fruitful, long-term association that we aspire to have with our teams. One needs to own and nurture their teams as a personal KRA and help them become the best versions of themselves not only professionally but personally as individuals as well.

Trust and Safety: Trusting people till the time they give you a reason not to. One might burn their fingers at times, but it's worth the honest message sent at the beginning of a new professional relationship. Show people how it's done, move out of their way and trust them to do well. However, always stand by for them to fall back on you and ably support them whenever required.

Personal Credibility: A leader's words mean and say much more than anyone else. Walk the talk, stick to commitments and lead by example. Any dissonance between what one practice and preaches kills personal credibility for good.



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LEADERSHIP

Q As someone who firmly believes in the concept of servant leadership, can you enlighten us on how servant leadership can be an effective tool in improving corporate culture? Why isn't 'servant leadership' more prevalent?

A I'll answer the second half first. Why Servant Leadership and associated behaviours are not too prevalent is because it comes at a great personal sacrifice. It requires your professional focus to shift from yourself to the team that you are responsible for. Like writer & speaker, Simon Sinek says, 'leaders must transition from being responsible for the JOB to being responsible for the PEOPLE who are responsible for the job'. Servant leadership expects you to accept your vulnerabilities openly. The vulnerability here is not a negative term that many folks confuse it with. It means you as a leader accept that you are also imperfect and on an ongoing journey of learning and growth. When you are yourself and you act and deliver without a mask at your workplace, that's what being vulnerable is and it's not easy. This is why it's the road less travelled.

Every leader's success is directly linked to the success and well-being

of their teams. Beyond a certain number of years of experience one's success is directly related to how you shape up as an able leader. Unfortunately, becoming a leader itself is extremely misinterpreted and that's the reason we see tons of 'leaders by the title' across industries that operate out of fear expecting people to work for them. On the contrary, a servant leader serves his team and is the one working for them. Servant leadership is a beautiful concept by the visionary Ken Blanchard that helps us operate as 'rightful' leaders. Teams that look up to their leader out of sheer respect and connectedness feel at ease while working in a safe, non-threatening environment. Such teams turn out to be the highest-performing ones. We need more able leaders around us and we need more such amazing workplaces where people turn up at work, raring to go and become the best versions of themselves.





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To act and safeguard against VUCA, it's also important to be flexible with one's Leadership style. Different situations might warrant a different approach and thus being adaptive as a leader is of prime importance as problem statements are no longer one-dimensional. Leadership competencies that focus on people continue to be crucial to business success. In a VUCA world, the most important thing is to anticipate the future and to strengthen cooperation between teams. Swift decision-making and connectedness are success factors to drive a common agenda by channelizing resources. This requires freedom, creativity, speed and flexibility to drive innovation within the organisation.

Q We experience VUCA almost daily in the global business world today. What according to you should be an appropriate strategy for steady leadership in an unsteady world of VUCA?

A The first step is to accept and resign to the fact that with VUCA, change is continuous and one must be ready to act with agility and prepare well keeping all bases/possibilities covered. With so many

external variables and a hoard of possibilities in today's dynamic business environment, leaders need to always be thinking on their feet and guide their teams to prepare for all eventualities. Some key leadership competencies that will define the success of a leader in the world of VUCA today are – Ambiguity Tolerance, Learning Agility, Adaptability, Intuition & Emotional Maturity. Leaders must

For me, effective leadership in the current dynamic business landscape will boil down to a) being an impactful change agent b) smartly working in matrix organisations and c) creating a clear vision for your team and effectively leading them.

HR STRATEGIES

Q Can you describe a time when you implemented an HR initiative or strategic HR intervention that didn't stick? What did you do differently to make it work successfully?

A A few years back, there was a people intervention that I planned around an organisational culture that warranted a huge mindset change and also a little more effort from people managers in operationally deploying it. As any change encounters resistance initially so was the case with this initiative that saw minimal adoption.

I thus recalibrated the approach and started with a pilot with a couple of functions, first speaking to their leaders and then having a discussion with the people managers alleviating any concerns. The other thing that I did was to leverage technology by deploying internal resources. The evaluation process that managers initially saw as becoming more time-consuming actually became quicker to respond to with a data repository automatically creating response backups. The tool adoption rate increased multi-fold in a month and increased significantly every week. Post the successful pilot, we had the perfect business case for all leaders to adapt to the new evaluation criteria and by that time we had also created strong advocates of

the concept and process who saw meaning in accepting the change.

By changing the deployment approach and creating happy internal customers who talked about the process themselves to other BUs, there was an automatic pull that was created. We had to no longer push the product or process internally but people were themselves looking forward to consuming it out of choice. Know your customer, identify their top pain areas and solve it for them. That creates credibility for HR professionals which further helps in subsequent change management initiatives as well.



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DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Q Diversity and inclusion often go hand in hand, but how can focusing on inclusion help companies embrace the actions and behaviours that will make diversity stick?

A Openness to diversity widens our access to talent and inclusion allows us to engage talent effectively. The first step is to create a business case for D&I; and what

better way than sparking innovation! This is the need of the hour for any organisation to remain competitive and agile in today's VUCA world. The importance of innovation for a winning team can never be overemphasized. While sensitizing people managers to cognitive biases at the time of hiring and selection is important, at the same time they need to be educated that D&I ultimately helps teams collectively perform better. Let's look at some numbers that research throws at us:

- Inclusive teams make better business decisions up to 87% of the time.
- Teams that follow an inclusive process make decisions 2X faster with half the number of meetings.
- Decisions made and executed by diverse teams deliver 60% better results.

Those are some pretty impressive figures for us to create inclusive workplaces that promote and nurture diversity. Better team collaboration, increased productivity and better results, isn't that what every people manager is looking for?

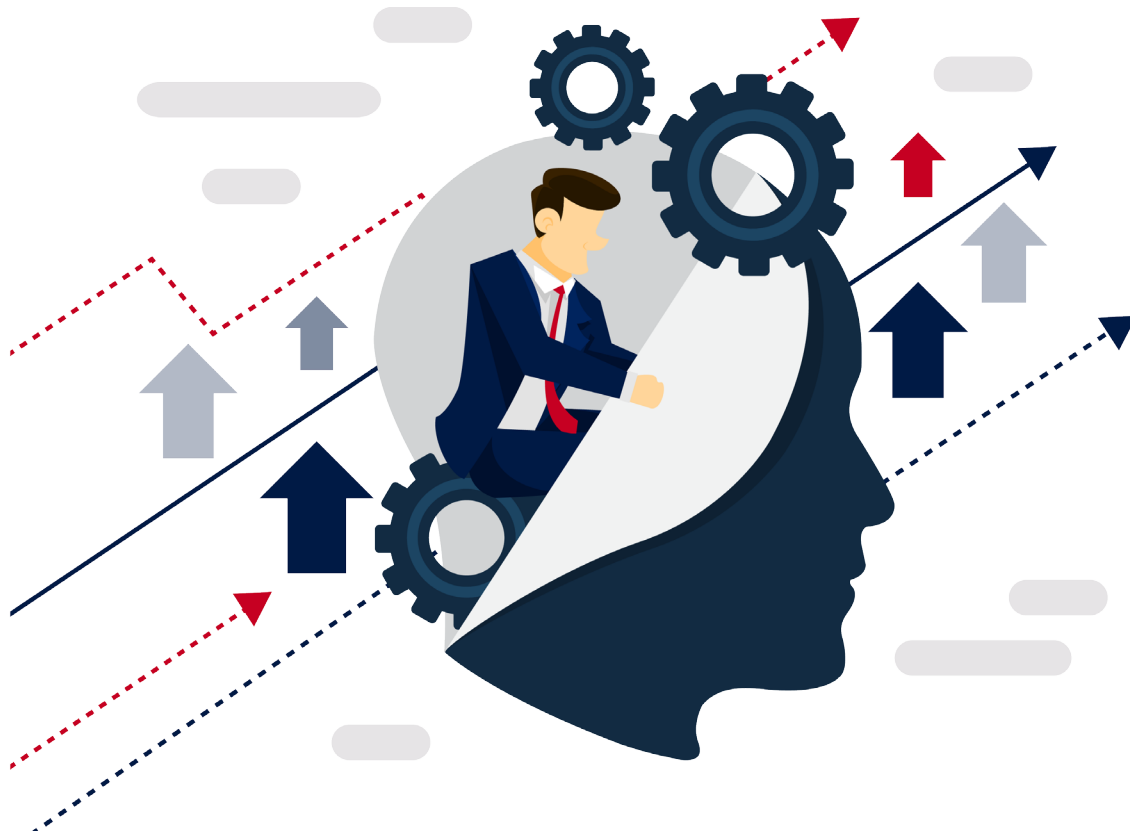
Inclusion is an ongoing process and not a one-off training session with a refresher every year! Hiring targets may boost diversity numbers, but won't automatically create an inclusive culture. Organisations can set targets for tangibles like customary diversity ratios and demographic splits. But the real magic happens beneath the surface. Do managers encourage open,

non-threatening conversations? Is everyone heard irrespective of their ethnicity, age, gender, seniority, religion, disability etc.? Are we open to new ideas and suggestions that might be contrary to our personal beliefs? Are we creating a progressive mindset where people are willing to break existing stereotypes? Inclusion awareness and sensitization is more personal than it seems and simply put, empathetic leadership holds the key.

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Q In most of the organisations the practices of D&I typically are drafted only to meet regulatory norms or, in some cases, are poorly funded. What measures can be taken to go beyond the routine efforts on diversity and inclusion?

A I believe the answer does not lie in an artificial, additional measure or a 2-hour sensitizing training but organisations looking inwards to find an answer. For one, it can be just another tick-box fad to showcase on the landing page and social media, while another might say that it truly wants to stand for more than just creating shareholder value. There's no right or wrong approach here since these decisions are also driven by organisational maturity and current financial performance, especially for early-stage companies. However, just like organisational culture, D&I finds a mention on the talent agenda which



is for the better as both have long gestation periods. This is again linked to the core values, beliefs and principles that the organisation espouses. Provided the cultural assimilation is done right, a purpose-driven organisation will itself come up with interventions contributing towards creating a social impact larger than itself. Ultimately, it all boils down to intent and purpose.

For D&I's success, it is critical that senior leadership get involved in diversity and inclusion. When senior leaders own D&I and make themselves a part of the diversity and inclusion management process, it sets the tone for the rest of the organisation to follow suit. Thus, HR or the People function plays a strong role as a catalyst in setting the right agendas at the workplace. I have said earlier as well and truly believe that HR professionals by the virtue of being gatekeepers to talent and defining workplace cultures owe a little more to the society by devising progressive people policies in organisations, D&I being one of them. It's a prerogative that we have, for shaping the long-term success of the organisation, let's realize our superpower and act wisely.

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Q Furthermore, what impact can a central focus on diversity and inclusion have on an organisation's financial performance?

A A diverse workforce increases productivity and profitability that will help the organisation to succeed in the global marketplace. There has been some credible research around this to possibly quantify and create the business case for D&I and the numbers speak for themselves.

Businesses with healthy gender diversity are 21% more likely to outperform their competitors whereas the ones with diverse ethnic backgrounds are 33% more likely to do so. In the United Kingdom specifically, senior executive teams saw a 3.5% increase in earnings before interest and taxes with every 10% increase in gender diversity. This implies that global business leaders should strive to create an atmosphere where multiple voices are heard, and their opinions are valued and considered.

A recent study by the Boston Consulting Group found that diversity increases the bottom line for companies. The study

found that increasing the diversity of leadership teams leads to innovation and improved financial performance. It looked at 1700 different companies across 8 different countries (India being one), with varying industries and company sizes. They have found that increasing diversity has a direct effect on the bottom line. Companies that have more diverse management teams have 19% higher revenue due to innovation. This finding is massive for tech companies, start-ups, and industry where innovation is the key to growth. It shows that diversity is not just a fancy metric to be chased, it is actually an integral part of a successful revenue generating business.

