'I strongly believe that leadership is about creating followership'

Arun Dinakar Rao, CPO, Birlasoft Ltd., a recognised Leadership Factory by the Great Manager Institute®, talks about how creating a culture of leadership, learning, and growing must go hand in hand with business goals for sustained growth

While leadership has always been a significant differentiator for organisations, how do you see it emerging in the next three to five years in your industry?

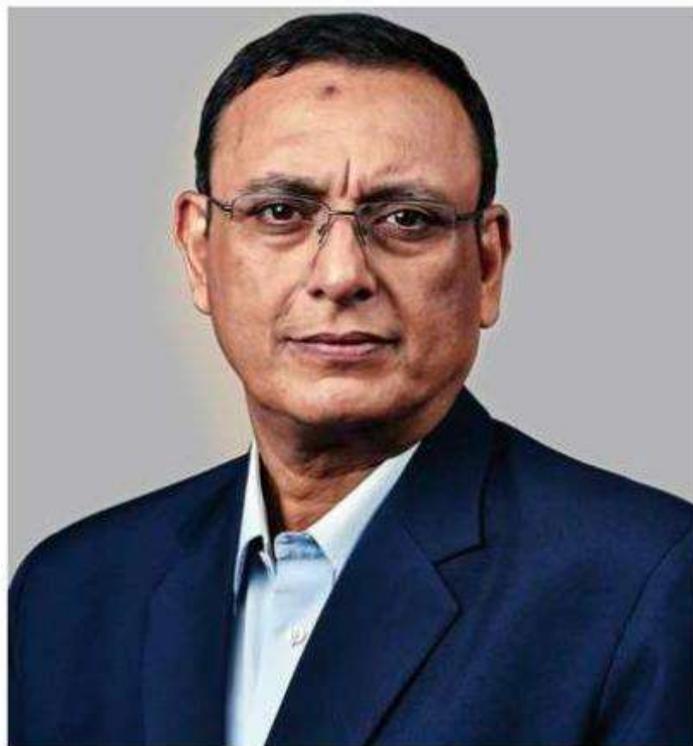*'Leadership is not about being in charge, it's about taking care of those in your charge.'*

– Simon Sinek

This quote sums up the evolving landscape facing leaders of tomorrow. With the workforce demographics changing each year, leadership effectiveness will be increasingly determined by skills like adaptability and emotional intelligence while respect for leaders who are technically proficient will continue to grow. We shall see 'classical aggregators' at risk.

More than ever, effective leadership lies in the willingness to evolve, learn and re-learn, and lead with purpose. Leaders will be charged with the responsibility of continuously building trust and engagement among diverse teams. Any successful leader of tomorrow would need to understand what AI can do for them and their team's success and look to deploy them. This evolving landscape demands leaders who can navigate complexity with resilience whilst prioritising ethical practices and employee well-being, ultimately driving innovation and sustainable growth at scale.

What mechanism do you use to evaluate your investments in leadership development?

Investments in leadership development are intended to create better people managers and build an internal pipeline of high calibre talent. Therefore, one of the key metrics that we keep track of is the number of higher-layered roles getting filled by internal talent. Additionally, 360-degree feedback gives other soft inputs on managerial capabilities. One of the key differentiators in our talent management process is the diligence with which we manage and run talent conversations for leaders at L1, L2 and L3 levels. We have created a technology platform where we assess leaders on their performance-potential matrix and cost of replacement grids and build customised development paths.

The use of AI-powered analytics helps forecast future talent requirements, aligning leadership development with market trends.

ARUN DINAKAR RAO, CPO, Birlasoft Ltd.

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> *Giving them real-time enabling feedback and a risk-free place to experiment, fail fast and rise, has characterised my role as a leader*

What is the one leadership challenge you see at Birlasoft which will require a relatively more rigorous preparation?

The war for talent is going to get intense and given that the rate of technology development is going to be insane, the biggest challenge that faces leadership is to be able to hold on to their workforce and keep them engaged and continuously challenged. Leaders have to ensure that they are demonstrating ambidexterity in terms of managing immediate workforce needs but also work on anticipating a future shift in skills/capabilities and guide their teams to proactively upskill.

At Birlasoft, we have undertaken a comprehensive Talent Transformation Program that helps leaders navigate their teams and align workforce skills with evolving business requirements. We are also creating a technology backbone to democratise the internal talent marketplace. For thereon, it would be about effective change management and communication and the secret sauce determining success would depend on effective adoption.

What is the role of DEI in your leadership journey at Birlasoft?

We are a growing enterprise and aiming to become a truly global IT services player. Therefore, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are integral to our growth and meaningful for our strategy as we aim to create and reinforce a culture that fosters inclusivity, employee engagement and innovation. Our DEI framework is built around pillars of affirmative hiring, providing access to appropriate learning opportunities and investing heavily in terms of developing diversity at different levels of the organisation. We have ensured that there is a greater ownership of this philosophy by driving all initiatives through an empowered DEI Council which has key organisation leaders as members. It is no longer just an HR problem to solve and is a business opportunity that we pursue to create success. Ultimately, the strategy is driven through multiple programmes, some of which are the pan-organisation 'Unconscious Bias' training and BEmpowered, a focussed career-transformative initiative for women leaders.

Tell us a little about your personal leadership journey

These questions make me realise how dated I could have become. Like most other people, I started my journey as an individual contributor but sought roles where I could experience and demonstrate some of the capabilities that build leadership credentials in people. After a few years, I got a chance to lead a small team in a relatively large IT services company and that is where I discovered the power to influence people towards larger objectives and began taking baby steps in my leadership journey. Thereafter, in multiple roles, understanding the business, my team and its strengths, and what success means to the organisation and its people, has allowed me to influence outcomes. I very strongly believe that leadership is about creating followership, and followership comes only when people stand to gain and real-term gain happens when people experience that they are growing on account of their association. So it has been helping people succeed, giving them real-time enabling feedback and a risk-free place to experiment, fail-fast and rise, that has characterised my role as a leader. I believe, practise and coach my teams that there is never a bigger value than Organisation First…for this they need to think business first and then their domain.