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HR's Role in Transformation: Creating Competitive Advantage Through People

T V Narendran is CEO & Managing Director, Tata Steel

We are living in an era of unprecedented change. Artificial Intelligence is advancing at a pace never seen before, a new generation of employees is entering the workforce with fundamentally different expectations, and businesses are navigating growing geopolitical and economic uncertainty. Across industries, organisations are investing heavily in automation, digital technologies, and AI to improve productivity and remain competitive.

Yet, as AI democratises knowledge and technology becomes increasingly accessible, sustainable competitive advantage will no longer come from technology alone. Most organisations will, in time, have access to similar tools and platforms. The true differentiator will be people—their skills, adaptability, capacity for innovation, and ability to execute strategy with conviction. If people are indeed an organisation's greatest asset, they must be managed strategically to create long-term business value.

This reality has fundamentally expanded the role of Human Resources. HR is no longer simply a function that manages talent processes. It is a strategic partner responsible for enabling business performance and transformation. Today's HR leaders must align people strategy with the organisation's most pressing business priorities—growth, productivity, agility, and sustainability. Their mandate is to ensure that the organisation has the right talent, the right leadership pipeline, the right workforce capabilities, and the right culture to succeed in a

world that will not wait

Driving workforce transformation

A clear example of HR's strategic role is in enabling business transformation. As organisations invest in automation, digital technologies, and new operating models, HR must ensure the workforce evolves alongside these changes through reskilling, upskilling, and capability building. At Tata Steel, initiatives such as a full AI capability building framework including the Reverse Mentoring programme, where digitally savvy young employees' mentor senior leaders, have helped accelerate digital adoption while fostering an inclusive learning culture. Similarly, the transition to Electric Arc Furnace (EAF)-based steelmaking in the UK and the Netherlands highlights the critical role of HR in preparing employees for new technologies, skills, and ways of working. These experiences underscore a fundamental truth: successful transformation is not just about technology but about equipping people to thrive in a changing future.

Managing the human side of change

Organisational transformation is rarely constrained by strategy; the real challenge lies in helping people embrace change with confidence and clarity. Whether driven by new technologies, evolving business models, or shifts in organisational structures, successful transformation depends on maintaining trust, engagement, and a shared sense of purpose. HR plays a pivotal role in this journey by

fostering transparent communication, supporting employee wellbeing, aligning leadership, and enabling effective change management. In many ways, every transformation comes with a ‘trust tax’ that can manifest as uncertainty, disengagement, or attrition if employees feel unsupported or disconnected from the vision. HR’s responsibility is to minimise this trust tax, ensuring that people remain informed, empowered, and committed to the journey ahead. Far from being a soft capability, building trust and confidence during periods of change is one of the most critical drivers of transformation success.

Safeguarding employer brand in times of transformation

As organisations navigate digitalisation, decarbonisation, automation, and other transformational shifts, HR plays a critical role in ensuring that the employer brand remains strong and competitive. Beyond managing change, HR must help the organisation continue attracting and retaining top talent, balancing business transformation with a compelling employee experience.

Today’s workforce looks beyond compensation, placing increasing importance on purpose, growth opportunities, inclusivity, flexibility, and alignment with organisational values. HR is therefore instrumental in shaping and communicating an authentic employee value proposition, leveraging digital and social platforms to showcase culture, career opportunities, employee success stories, and sustainability commitments. Organisations that excel in this area will be better positioned to secure the talent needed for long-term success.

The future HR leader: A business architect

The future of HR demands a fundamental shift in identity and capability. The HR leader of tomorrow must move beyond being a functional expert and become a business architect—

someone who shapes organisational strategy, manages human capital risks, and creates competitive advantage through people. This is a multifaceted role that requires the integration of several distinct capabilities: the analytical rigour of a data scientist—leveraging workforce analytics, AI, and predictive insights to make informed, evidence-based business decisions; the depth of a behavioural scientist—with a nuanced understanding of human motivation, wellbeing, leadership dynamics, and organisational culture; the commercial acumen of an economist—able to evaluate talent supply and demand, workforce productivity, labour market trends, and the broader economic impact of people-related decisions; and the strategic vision of a business leader—thinking beyond the HR function to understand how people strategy connects to competitive positioning, customer outcomes, and long-term value creation.

Success in the future of HR will depend on the ability to seamlessly integrate these analytical, behavioural, and economic perspectives—to drive both organisational performance and individual employee success. These are not competing priorities. The best HR leaders understand that they are, in fact, the same priority viewed from different angles.

Conclusion

The future of HR is not about managing processes. It is about enabling transformation through people. In a world defined by AI, decarbonisation, shifting workforce expectations, and continuous disruption, organisations will increasingly compete on talent, capability, culture, and adaptability. Technology will be the enabler. People will be the differentiator. 

The opinion expressed is personal.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Transformation is often described through the language of technology, strategy, and innovation. Yet, behind every successful transformation is something far more human: people. Organisations may invest in sophisticated technologies and ambitious strategies, but sustainable change ultimately depends on how effectively they engage, enable, and empower their people.

This is where Human Resources (HR) assumes a role far beyond managing processes and policies—one of a ‘modern alchemist’—turning organisational aspirations into a shared sense of purpose.

Understanding what employees need, value, and aspire creates the foundation for trust and belonging. A strong organisational culture gives that transformation direction, while employee ownership ensures that change is embraced rather than simply implemented.

HR has a pivotal role in creating an environment where experimentation is encouraged, feedback is valued and people feel empowered to grow. As organisations navigate an increasingly complex and fast-changing business landscape, the true measure of transformation will not be the technologies adopted or strategies formulated, but the people and culture strengthened along the way.

Do write in with your views to imeditorial@spentamultimedia.com

Maneck Davar
Maneck Davar

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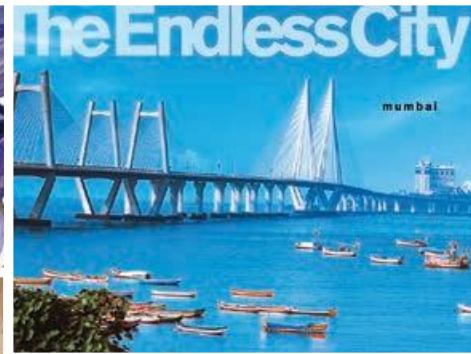
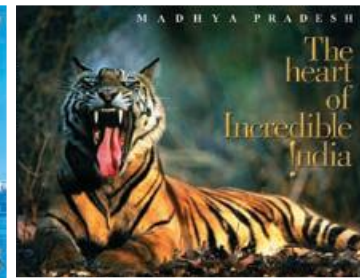
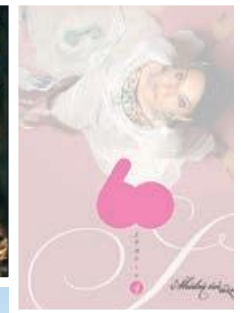
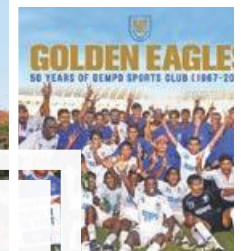
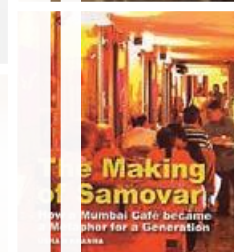
SUBSCRIPTIONS

Robert Gomes | 022 24811006
robert@spentamultimedia.com
Bhairavnath Sutar | 022 24811006
bhairav@spentamultimedia.com



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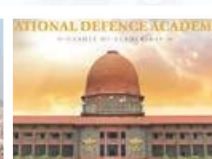
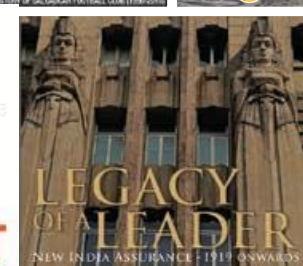
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HR AT THE HELM







Armaan Hoyvov

HR- The Alchemist

In a world of constant disruption, it is people—shaped by empathy, culture, and capability—who become the true gold of any organisation.

♦ ARVIND KUMAR, INDIAN OIL CORPORATION LIMITED



Since ancient times, alchemists pursued what most called an impossible dream: the transformation of base metals into gold. Their quest ultimately failed—but the spirit that animated it did not. Curiosity, experimentation, perseverance, and the conviction that transformation is possible remain profoundly relevant to any organisation navigating today's turbulent world.

This article argues that human resources (HR) has become the modern alchemist of organisational life—shaping culture, nurturing capability, fostering ownership, and building the conditions for continuous renewal. Sustainable excellence is never achieved through systems and strategies alone. It is achieved through people who feel valued, trusted, capable, and inspired to give their very best.

The real alchemy of the twenty-first century lies not in creating gold, but in transforming human potential into organisational excellence.

Introduction

Every time I walk into one of IndianOil's ten* refineries, I am struck by the same thought: the potential in this organisation is extraordinary. My question, when I began engaging deeply with our HR teams, was simple—are we creating the conditions for that potential to ignite? And is that enough to generate value in changing times?

For centuries, alchemy fired the human imagination—not merely as the pursuit of wealth, but as the deeper conviction that the impossible could be made possible through curiosity, discipline, and unwavering perseverance. As an engineer, I find this framing useful. Transformation does not happen through aspiration alone; it requires the right reaction conditions and the right catalyst. That is what I believe HR must become.

*Including group company CPCL's Manali Refinery

The world has changed. Have we?

Since 2000, 52 per cent of Fortune 500 companies have gone bankrupt, been acquired, or have ceased to exist. Nokia commanded over 50 per cent of the global smartphone market in 2007; within six years, its share collapsed to under 3 per cent. Blockbuster operated 9,000 stores at its peak before filing for bankruptcy as Netflix redefined the industry. Closer to home, HMT Watches and Jet Airways echo the same lesson. None of these organisations set out to fail. They underestimated how rapidly the ground beneath them was shifting.

Yesterday's winning formula has a troubling habit of becoming tomorrow's constraint.

For IndianOil, the urgency is immediate. India remains approximately 90 per cent import-dependent on crude oil. When tensions in West Asia sent crude prices past \$120 per barrel in the last few months, our teams responded under pressure.

We managed. But every such episode reminds me: does our workforce have the capability, agility, and resilience to keep responding as the world changes faster than ever before?

This is why we launched SPRINT—IndianOil’s strategic transformation initiative built around six pillars including Nurturing Leadership & Talent and Energy Transition Readiness. Resilience during a crisis is never built during the crisis itself

Field reality: Opportunity crude challenge
Challenges arose in processing opportunity crudes—Ural crude from Russia required modified operating parameters. Ural crude poses difficulty in achieving the required quality of bitumen grades, thereby rendering constraints in full capacity operations, especially, at units like Mathura Refinery where coker unit is not available to handle the bottom of the barrel (i.e., vacuum residue). IndianOil R&D pitched in and we succeeded, maintaining refinery throughput at more than 100 per cent of design capacity, produced VG30 & VG40 grade Bitumen, through sheer grit and by upholding our Core Values of Nation-First and Innovation. HR became the critical enabler—building the capable, committed workforce that made it possible.



The transformation reaction: Six elements Gold (atomic number 79) and mercury (atomic number 80) sit adjacent in the periodic table. Modern nuclear science has shown that bombarding mercury with a high-energy neutron can, under precisely controlled conditions, produce gold. The same logic applies to human transformation. The raw material—the potential in our people—is already extraordinary. The problem is never the people. It is the absence of the right reaction conditions.



Transformation Periodic Table - Each element is essential. Together they constitute the transformation reaction.

Element 1**Care and Empathy —The heat that initiates everything**

In large organisations, HR can drift toward the transactional—an automated voice call, a templated response, a process completed without a conversation. When employees experience HR as administrative rather than enabling, something fundamental breaks. Daniel Goleman's research identifies empathy as often stronger predictor of leadership effectiveness than technical expertise alone.

Refinery capacity can be engineered. Technology can be procured. What cannot be procured is a workforce that is engaged, resilient, and proud. That must be built—from the inside.

Google's Project Aristotle found that the single most consistent characteristic of high-performing teams was psychological safety—the belief that people can speak up, take risks, and admit mistakes without fear of blame. As Paul Santagata of Google put it: "There's no team without trust." Empathy is the heat that initiates the reaction. Without it, no other element takes root.

Element 2**Culture —The invisible catalyst**

Gallup's 2025 research shows only 20 per cent of employees globally are actively engaged, costing the world economy an estimated \$10 trillion in lost productivity. In a high-hazard environment like a refinery, a passively disengaged employee is not merely a productivity loss—they are a latent safety risk.

Lou Gerstner observed: "Culture isn't just one aspect of the game. It is the game." Culture is not built through values posters. It accumulates through ten thousand, small, daily acts—how leaders behave when they are tired, under pressure, or believe no one is watching.

PSM — A paradigm shift in culture

IndianOil's Process Safety Management (PSM) initiative has become more than a compliance programme—it ingrains itself into the DNA. When safety culture is authentic, it cannot be switched off. HR becomes the critical enabler in building capacity in the safety domain, ensuring every employee understands not just the what of process safety, but the why—making it a matter of personal conviction, not procedure

Element 3**Ownership—'The change within'**

On the night of November 26, 2008, when terrorists attacked the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai, many employees chose to stay and protect their guests at extraordinary personal risk—some at the cost of their lives. These actions were not prescribed in any manual. They emerged from a culture in which employees had internalised their purpose so deeply that ownership became identity.

My ask of our HR function: every promise made to an employee must belong to a named individual, with a defined outcome and a deadline. The shift from 'not my job' to 'I will own this' must begin with HR modelling exactly that behaviour—every time, without exception. HR must move beyond their comfort zone and actively engage with teams/people.

Element 4**Knowledge, Capability & Digital Readiness —The craftsman's discipline**

The energy transition has arrived. Green hydrogen, carbon capture, AI-driven predictive maintenance—each demands capabilities that a workforce trained for a different era does not automatically possess. Employees who are growing feel valued; those who sense their skills becoming obsolete disengage quietly,



When Refineries, Marketing, Pipelines and R&D broke silos: +15% pipeline throughput, global market entry

long before any metric captures it. Digital transformation without human transformation is infrastructure without operators.

Google’s Project Oxygen found that the behaviours of great managers were counterintuitive: technical expertise ranked last; coaching and empowerment ranked first. The shift from instinct to evidence must start with HR. HR role in our Digital agenda is not peripheral; it is foundational.

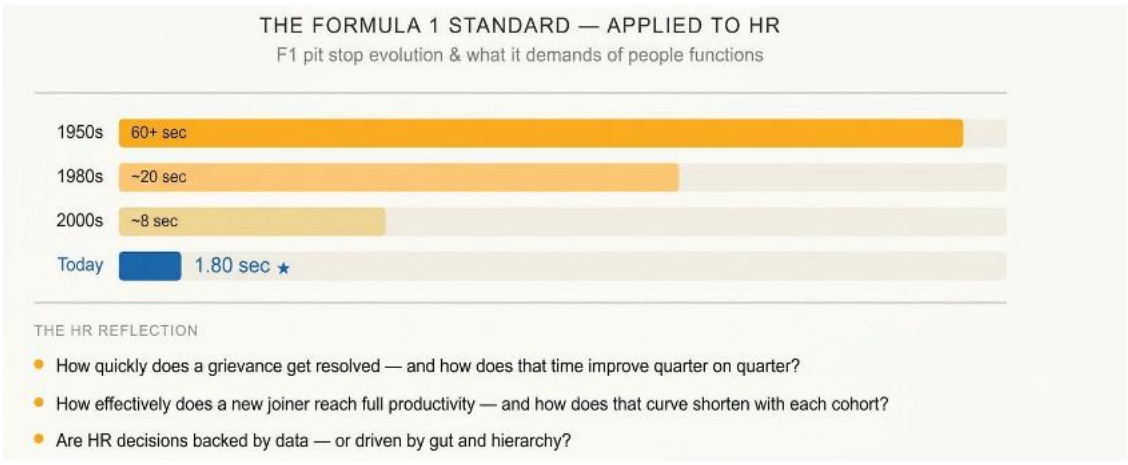
Element 5

Recognition—The multiplying effect

Gallup’s research establishes that employees who receive meaningful recognition weekly are five times more likely to be engaged. 79 per cent of those who leave an organisation cite lack of appreciation—not salary—as their primary reason. The cost of timely recognition is, in almost every case, approximately zero.

When a shift employee walks to the single-window HR desk after completing their morning shift, the measure of our progress is simple: do they leave with their query settled and a sense that someone in this organisation genuinely cared? One resolved query. One happy employee. Multiplied a thousand times — that is how culture compounds.

When our Refineries, Marketing, Pipelines, and R&D teams finally broke their silos toward a shared goal, the result was a 15 per cent increase in crude pipeline throughput to our North-East Refineries, significant logistics savings, and a technology which was formulated by our R&D now will be used across industry and is even being exported to Saudi Aramco. XtraFlo™ is not a technology story. It is a story about what



becomes possible when people who feel valued decide to keep raising the standard together.

Element 6

Continuous Improvement — The organisation that never stops

In the early years of Formula 1, a pit stop took upwards of 60 seconds. Today the world record stands at 1.80 seconds—achieved through decades of relentless experimentation, teamwork, and continuous refinement. The question for every HR function is not “Did we improve?” It is “Have we built the conditions that make improvement automatic?”



Conclusion: What I am asking of you

When I addressed our HR teams from across IndianOil’s refineries and pipeline regions, I wanted to leave them with one conviction: you are not a support function. You are the alchemist. The raw material—the extraordinary potential of the people in our refineries, pipelines, and offices—is already there.

An organisation’s future is not determined by its technology or strategy alone. It is determined by its ability to unlock the full potential of its people—to build an organisation that learns faster, adapts faster, and improves faster than the challenges confronting it.

The ancient alchemists sought not only gold, but also the Elixir of Life—a symbol of renewal and continuity. Organisations face a similar challenge. Achieving excellence once is an accomplishment; renewing that excellence year after year is a capability.

Gold was never the real destination. The capacity to renew ourselves, again and again — that is the prize. **IM**

Be the alchemist your organisation needs.

Adapted from a leadership address delivered to HR teams across IndianOil’s refineries and pipeline regions, May 26, 2026.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arvind Kumar is
Director (Refineries),
Indian Oil Corporation
Limited.

Element	Role in the Transformation Reaction
Care & Empathy	Provides the heat — initiates trust and psychological safety
Culture	The invisible catalyst — shapes what people do when no one is watching
Ownership	Supplies the activation energy — transforms bystanders into custodians
Knowledge & Capability	The craftsman’s discipline — ensures the workforce stays future-ready
Recognition	The multiplier — turns individual pride into collective performance
Continuous Improvement	Sustains the reaction — keeps the organization permanently in motion



The best strategies emerge when leaders move from stress-driven reactions to clear, focused thinking.

♦ KATE PEARLMAN-SHAW, AUTHOR, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP*

LEADERSHIP

The neurobiology of leadership

After the familiar cycle of planning meetings, stakeholder conversations and performance reviews, my client finally sat down to write his strategy. The thinking had been forming in his mind for days. He knew the priorities, the commercial pressures and the expectations of the board. Yet when he opened the document, nothing came.

This is not unusual. Planning, strategy and strategic thinking remain essential to organisational progress. They provide direction, discipline and a shared basis for action. However, producing them depends on something leaders often overlook: the brain must be able to do the work.

For leaders in fast-moving and global organisations, this matters deeply. Whether the task is shaping a growth plan, responding to digital disruption, integrating a new team or making a difficult people decision, performance is not driven by strategy alone. It is driven by the condition of the brain.

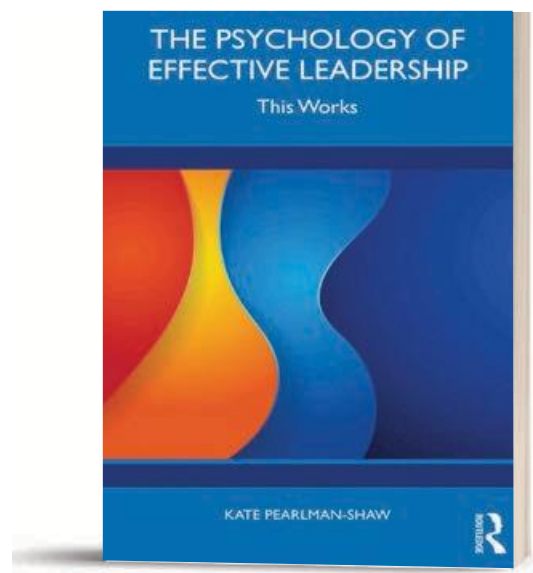
Understanding how the brain supports performance is useful across many leadership tasks. Although the brain contains around 80 billion neurons with countless connections, two systems are especially relevant here: the analytic network and the limbic system.

The analytic, or task-positive, network is responsible for complex thinking and decision-making. Sitting mainly in the prefrontal cortex (PFC), it is where brain-area integration occurs. When we build a multifaceted plan, the brain has to coordinate several demanding processes at once. This uses working memory, the brain's internal project management system, coordinating language processing and production, information synthesis, and the visual and motor coordination required to translate thought into words. For this to work well, the system needs as little interference as possible. Much of that interference comes from the limbic system, located towards the back of the brain above the brain stem.

The limbic system is not a single structure but a group of interconnected areas, including the thalamus, hypothalamus and amygdala. It

functions as our internal alarm and response system. Processing large volumes of information about what is happening to us now, as well as what we anticipate might happen next, it activates the fight-or-flight responses that are designed to protect us. Neurobiologists suggest that in today's highly technological and uncertain environment, the limbic system is being stimulated more intensely than ever. For leaders, the crucial point is this: when the limbic system is highly activated, it reduces the effectiveness of the analytical network. This is commonly known as a 'threat state.'

My client was likely to be experiencing writer's block because he was in a threat state. He felt overwhelmed and stressed, was starting to question his own capability, and was becoming anxious that he would not finish the strategy in time. When we are in threat states, it becomes harder to take action and think logically. We are more prone to bias and more likely to make errors. Emotional arousal increases, behaviour shifts, and our ability to pay proper attention to other people is reduced.



For senior managers, entrepreneurs and functional leaders, this has practical consequences. A leader in a threat state may procrastinate, delay a decision that needs to be made, over-control a capable team, or miss weak signals from the market. None of these failures begin as a lack of ability. They begin



when the brain's alarm system becomes too loud for its higher-order thinking system to operate well.

The positive news is that once we understand this pattern, we can actively influence it. We can intentionally help the brain move into the opposite condition: the 'reward state,' where limbic system activity is reduced and the analytic network becomes more accessible. In this state, we are better able to perform. It is the state leaders need for their most demanding work: thinking strategically, making difficult decisions, giving challenging news and feedback, building accountability and momentum, managing conflict, and maintaining focus by filtering out distractions.

There are four fairly simple activities leaders can use to reach this more functional position. The first is to reconnect with core purposes, plural. When we concentrate on meaningful purpose, prefrontal cortex activity improves, signalling to the limbic system that "I'm OK." We have more than one purpose at work: our personal reason for doing the role, the broader organisational purpose, the local purpose attached to a specific initiative, and the immediate 'now' purpose, the reason for the action we are taking in this moment. Making these purposes clear for ourselves, and explaining them clearly to others, helps the brain become calmer, more settled and more focused.

Second, use emotional regulation techniques. Most of us already have a toolbox of practices that calm us; the challenge is remembering to use them before the limbic system takes over. Breathing, mindfulness and self-affirmations are classic examples. Saying emotions out loud, tapping and focusing on nature are also proven ways to reduce limbic system noise. Even a short pause between stimulus and response can be enough to prevent a reactive email, a defensive comment or an unnecessary escalation.

Third, talk it over with a colleague. A positive interaction, such as a conversation with a confidante, mentor or coach, can create oxytocin, a powerful neurotransmitter substance that calms limbic system activity. Social support is an important correlate of resilience at work, particularly important as leadership can be lonely, especially when decisions are complex and the stakes are high.

Finally, there are ways to help the prefrontal cortex keep working despite high limbic activity. Use a 'third brain': a storage system for all the noise, such as journalling, a strong list system or better use of a PA. Chunk the task into sections, rewarding yourself for each part completed, as this creates another key neurotransmitter substance, dopamine, our reward chemical that also calms the limbic system. Replenish energy too, because complex leadership tasks consume a great deal of it. Hydration, food, movement and rest are not soft extras; they are part of enhancing executive functioning. Cognitive management techniques also help. Questions such as "What is the evidence for this?" "What might I be missing?" and "Where could bias be influencing my judgement?" keep the analytical system engaged.

This is not about replacing business discipline with neuroscience language. It is about recognising that leadership performance depends on the interaction between context, emotion, cognition and behaviour. Boards and management teams can have the best strategy frameworks available, but if the people using them are in a chronic threat state, the quality of thinking will suffer.

Once my client entered a reward state, his strategy began to move. The ideas that had seemed blocked became accessible again. The document did not write itself, but his brain was now able to do the work. That is the central leadership lesson: leadership performance starts in the brain. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Pearlman-Shaw is a clinical psychologist. Kate is also author, *The Psychology of Effective Leadership: This Works*.



The case for a ‘Lean Director’

Over the past three decades, numerous companies have made attempts to transform to becoming Lean. Percentage success has been in low, single digits. Doing more of the same has not addressed the causes of failures. Does it need more serious attention? I think so, and hence this rationale. Companies appoint Board Directors for finance because capital is strategic, for technology because digital capability is strategic, for risk because governance is strategic, retired bureaucrats for getting work done in the government system etc. If the company’s strategy is creating enduring competitive advantage, and Lean is today’s best proven competitive strategy, shouldn’t there be a director on the company’s board keeping the company focused and accountable in becoming enduring Lean? Let’s examine why.

For decades, companies have attempted to implement Lean Manufacturing. Some have enjoyed modest success. Many have abandoned the journey. Most have concluded that Lean

delivers only incremental improvements. Some think it is hard and do not want to embark on the journey. In reality, very few organisations have ever attempted Lean in its true sense or in the proper way. They have attempted it as projects, implemented random selection of tools, conducted workshops, attempted training, etc. But they have rarely attempted a genuine transformation. The reason is simple. Lean has never been an operational initiative. It is a leadership philosophy and a business strategy. And business strategy belongs in the boardroom and the CEO.

Lean is not a factory programme

Perhaps the biggest misunderstanding about Lean is that it is something the operations department implements. Nope. It is not. Lean thinking and systems applies across the entire value chain of the business process. Lean changes the way an entire organisation thinks, behaves, decides, and competes. It influences marketing, product design, procurement, finance, sales, logistics, administration, human resources, and customer service just as much as manufacturing. Above all, it changes leadership

thinking and attitude towards everyone's job definition and daily work routines. It is like they say "Monkey see, monkey do." Leadership has to lead the change demonstratively and not through verbal dictats. When leadership does not change, the organisation will not and so cannot become Lean. It merely becomes one expecting change by doing more of the same and at best attempting the use of a few Lean tools. By now we should have learnt that it doesn't work that way.

The responsibility cannot be delegated

The decision to become Lean is one of the most important strategic decisions a company can make. Why should any company want to become Lean? As companies navigate on their goals and growth, sometimes it is a smooth sailing and sometimes through rough and difficult waters. Besides the environmental challenges, geo political shocks, barriers that may make it difficult to enter new markets or products, challenges from customers buying power, challenges from supplier dominance, potential threats from new entrants, products or processes, obsolescence of the product or process, disruptive innovations, alternate solutions etc. Challenges and uncertainties require a competitive strategy that will give any company an enduring competitive advantage.

Today, true Lean is that panacea that not only gives a lasting competitive advantage but if implemented properly can even make competition insignificant or irrelevant! Lean determines how the organisation will respond to customer requirements, provide solutions to customer problems through products or services, react to changes with speed and compete successfully. Lean determines how it will develop people to solve problems. How people and organisation will improve every day. How it will create long-term competitive advantage. Such decisions cannot be delegated

to middle management. Yet that is exactly what many companies do. The CEO announces a Lean initiative. Responsibility is handed to the departments that are organised in silos or to a Continuous Improvement Manager or a department christened Lean Manufacturing or Kaizen. Trainer comes in and teaches few random tools and conducts workshops. Senior management continues to behave and manage exactly as before. Traditional thinking remains intact. The Lean vocabulary that should be the daily speak is absent. Predictably, the transformation stalls. Not because Lean failed. But because the leadership never changed!

Lean is not an HR programme

Many organisations position Lean as a training programme, because they perceive Lean as something middle and lower management should do. Employees attend workshops. Certificates are distributed that are of no practical relevance. Improvement projects are assigned. Photographs are taken. Everyone returns to work. Nothing fundamental changes. Culture cannot be changed through training alone. Culture changes only when leadership demonstrates their lean compliant behaviour every single day and others will follow. Lean is not learnt in classrooms or outdoors. It is learnt only by daily practice of Lean. Success of Lean is driven more by passion, while the intellect's role is to solve problems.

Lean is like yoga

There is an interesting similarity between Lean and Yoga. One can attend lectures on Yoga. One can understand every posture intellectually. One can read dozens of books. Yet none of this produces flexibility, balance or strength. Those benefits come only from disciplined daily practice with an experienced Yoga teacher. Lean is no different. PowerPoint presentations do not create Lean organisations. Daily practice,



daily coaching, daily observation, daily problem solving, daily learning, daily improvement, when all done consistently are the right steps to becoming Lean. Without disciplined practice, Lean becomes another management initiative. With disciplined practice, it becomes organisational culture and its hidden competitive strategy.

Why most lean transformations lose momentum

Most companies begin enthusiastically. Within months, priorities change. Customer crises emerge. Financial pressures increase. Poor marketing forecasts cause interruptions. Leadership attention shifts. Company loses sight of Lean activity. Improvement activities reduce. Old habits quietly return. The organisation has not rejected Lean. It has simply lost focus. The greatest enemy of Lean is not resistance. It is distraction and inefficiency.

Lean management makes a concerted

effort to involve employees in Kaizen through suggestions. Thus, the suggestion system is an integral part of the established management system, and the number of workers' suggestions is regarded as an important criterion in reviewing the performance of their supervisors. The manager of the supervisors is in turn expected to assist them so that they can help workers generate more suggestions.

Western culture focuses more on result matrix rather than the process matrix and managements involvement, expecting large innovations rather than incremental improvements. That culture expects drastic change in results rather than incremental which is Kaizen done consistently. In reality when companies believe they are doing well, they are not able to see the wastes imposing costs and eroding potential margins. A different perspective with creating a new responsibility would be a better way anchoring the strategy.

The suggestion program yields results when

interlinked with the improvement program strategy with management involvement and speed in acting and replying to the suggestions. An important aspect is that each suggestion leads to change or a new standard. In the 1980s, Toyota received about one and a half million suggestions for improvement and implemented about 95 per cent of them. Although that journey has continued, figures are not available in public domain. Similarly, Matsushita recorded six million suggestions in 1985 and the most number by any one individual in a year was 16,821. At Mysore Kirloskar, too, we solved tens of thousands of problems across the value chain leveraging the quality circles to attain a sixty percent cost reduction and a six sigma level complaint free customer satisfaction.

Every strategic discipline has a place in the boardroom

Modern boards recognise the importance of specialised expertise. They appoint directors with backgrounds in Finance, Law, Risk management, Corporate governance, retired bureaucrats for influencing government-related work and policies, Technology, Cybersecurity, etc. Why? Because these functions influence long-term success. If Lean is truly expected to become the company's competitive strategy, why should Lean not receive the same representation? Why should the board not include a director responsible for ensuring that Lean remains central to strategic thinking?

The empty chair in every boardroom

Every company serious about becoming Lean should consider appointing a 'Board Director – Lean Transformation'. This is not another executive responsible for running operations. Nor is it another improvement manager. The role is entirely different. The Board Director's responsibility is governance. To ensure that every strategic decision supports the Lean

journey. To prevent management from reducing Lean to isolated projects. To continually challenge leadership thinking. To ask questions that others may overlook. Are we solving root causes or merely treating symptoms? Are we developing people or simply demanding results? Are our systems creating waste? Are our policies preventing continuous improvement? Are today's decisions strengthening our competitiveness five, ten, fifteen years from now? These questions rarely arise naturally during conventional board meetings. Yet they are detrimental to whether Lean succeeds or fails.

If Lean is truly a company's strategy for creating enduring competitive advantage, why is there no equivalent voice in the boardroom? Why is the one discipline that influences every function, every employee, every customer and every business process rarely represented where the most important decisions are made? Perhaps the greatest weakness in most Lean transformations is not on the shop floor. It is in the boardroom and the corner C-suite.

Lean is total strategy work. Shouldn't board decisions be Lean thinking? When a Board approves another layer of management, it influences organisational flow. When it approves additional reports, approvals and procedures, it influences bureaucracy. When it prioritises quarterly financial results over capability development, it influences culture. In fact, people development and human matrix are absent in many board discussions. When it chooses inventory over flow, firefighting over problem solving, automation over developing people, or cost reduction over customer value, it is making decisions that weaken the company's Lean journey. These are not operational decisions. They are governance decisions. Yet very few Boards possess anyone with the knowledge or experience to recognise their long-term consequences.

Lean cannot be delegated

Many improvement initiatives can be delegated. An ERP implementation can be delegated. An ISO certification programme can be delegated. Setting up a new production line can be delegated. Lean cannot. True Lean changes the way an organisation is led. It changes how decisions are made. It changes organisational behaviour. It involves changing management philosophy. It changes culture. It changes the relationship between leaders and people. No middle manager possesses either the authority or the influence to transform these dimensions of an enterprise. Only the CEO and the board do. Delegating Lean while retaining traditional leadership thinking and actions is rather like expecting a ship to change course while refusing to move its rudder.

The director protects the journey

Every organisation experiences changing business conditions. Economic downturns. New competitors. Supply chain disruptions. Leadership changes etc. During such periods, Lean initiatives are often the first casualty. A Board Director for Lean Transformation serves as the organisation's compass. His or her role is not to protect projects. It is to protect direction. They ensure that short-term pressures never destroy long-term capability. They keep Lean at the center of strategic decision-making. They help maintain organisational discipline when circumstances encourage shortcuts. Most importantly, they ensure that leadership remains accountable for the transformation.

Why a Board Director – Lean Transformation?

The purpose of appointing a Board Director – Lean Transformation is frequently misunderstood. This individual is not another operational executive. Nor are they responsible for running improvement projects, conducting Kaizen events or implementing Lean tools.

The Board governs. Management executes. The Director's responsibility is to ensure that Lean remains central to the company's strategic thinking and long-term direction. Their role is to ask the questions that determine whether the organisation becomes truly Lean or merely appears Lean. Are we eliminating root causes or merely managing symptoms? Does this decision simplify the organisation or increase complexity? Are we building people or becoming more dependent on systems? Will this investment strengthen our long-term competitiveness or merely improve this quarter's results? Are we creating customer value or merely attempting to reduce costs? These questions are rarely asked consistently. Yet they determine the future of the enterprise.

The guardian of competitive advantage

Every organisation experiences pressure to abandon long-term thinking. Economic downturns. Market disruptions. Customer demands. Leadership changes. Quarterly financial pressures. Under such circumstances, organisations naturally drift towards complexity. More reports. More approvals. More hierarchy. More inventory. More meetings. More firefighting. Every one of these appears reasonable in isolation. Collectively, they erode competitiveness.

A Board Director – Lean Transformation serves as the organisation's guardian against this drift. Their responsibility is not to defend Lean projects. It is to defend Lean thinking. To ensure that every major strategic decision strengthens the organisation's capability to create customer value, develop people, eliminate waste, simplify processes and build competitive advantage that competitors cannot easily replicate.

Cost of the empty chair

Consultants or Sensei who have led successful Lean transformations are a great on any

company's Lean journey. So, companies invest money in Lean consultants, digital technologies, automation, training programmes, ERP systems and continuous improvement initiatives, software etc. Some obtain temporary improvements. Few achieve lasting transformation. The missing ingredient is rarely technical knowledge. It is governance. Without sustained commitment from the top, Lean gradually becomes another programme competing for management attention. With Board-level stewardship, it becomes the philosophy that governs every significant decision the organisation makes. That difference determines whether Lean remains an initiative or becomes the company's way of thinking.

Governance before implementation

Many organisations ask consultants to conduct Lean workshops. Instead, experienced consultants should be asked to handhold and guide the company through the transformation. Others recruit Lean managers. Some appoint Lean coordinators. These actions are contra Lean. None addresses the real issue. Lean does not fail because companies lack improvement projects. Lean fails because companies lack guidance and governance. Look at Toyota's results over the past years and compare it with others in the industry—in Toyota everyone is a Lean Manager and everyone is an industrial engineer involved in continuous improvement every day! Similar was the case with Mysore Kirloskar. Transformation requires someone at the highest level continuously asking whether every major decision aligns with the organisation's Lean philosophy. Without that governance, implementation eventually loses direction.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sanjeev Baitmangalkar is Founder & Principal Consultant, Stratmann Consulting.

A strategic investment

Some may question whether another Board position is necessary. The better question is this: Can a company afford to embark upon a multi-

year transformation affecting every function, every employee, every customer and every supplier without having genuine Lean expertise at the highest level of decision-making? Boards routinely appoint financial experts because finance matters. They appoint legal experts because governance matters. They appoint technology experts because digital capability matters. Lean deserves the same recognition—not because it improves factories, but because it determines how the entire enterprise creates value.

Conclusion: Filling the empty chair

The proposition is both simple and profound. Every strategic capability that determines an organisation's future usually has a place in the boardroom. If Lean results is genuinely what the management intends to achieve as enduring competitive advantage, then developing exceptional people and building a culture of continuous improvement becomes imperative. Then Lean deserves the same level of strategic representation. Perhaps the most important chair missing from many boardrooms today is not another expert, specialist or influencer. It is the chair for Lean Transformation. For it is from that chair that the organisation's long-term competitiveness can be protected, nurtured and sustained.

Companies often ask, "How do we implement Lean successfully?" Perhaps the more important question is: "Who ensures that Lean remains the company's strategy long after the initial enthusiasm has faded?" The answer cannot be a middle manager. It cannot be HR. It cannot be the individual departments. It must be the CEO and the Board. A Board Director – Lean Transformation gives Lean what it has been denied in most organisations: strategic ownership at the highest level. Only then does Lean cease to be a programme. It becomes the company's philosophy, its management system, and ultimately, its enduring competitive advantage. 

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Global uncertainty is an increasing challenge for all leaders, writes Tom Kolditz, PhD, Brigadier General, US Army (retired) and author of *Against the Storm: How True Leaders Prevail When the World Shakes* (co-authored by Mariana Khomitska).

**MYTH
BUSTER**

Leading in the new uncertainty

A principal difference in leaders today, compared to even 10 years ago, is the level of extreme uncertainty they must handle. No longer simply a characteristic of crisis, uncertainty is a permanent part of the modern environment, driven by rapid technology changes like AI, shifting global policies, and economic shifts. More than ever before, leaders need to develop their organisation with the highest possible levels of trust and resilience.

Such leadership is essential to put ‘money in the bank’; in other words, to have in place the best leadership qualities so that uncertainty and crises can be dealt with effectively. There are leadership myths that come undone in dealing with uncertainty:

MYTH 1: COURAGE IS REQUIRED FOR TRUST IN UNCERTAINTY

Courage in leadership is a popular keynote topic, people love to imagine themselves as building trust by being courageous. Rather than focusing on courage during uncertainty, it’s better to simply focus on avoiding cowardice. Seldom do people discuss cowardice, or what it is, or how it impacts leadership.

First, don’t ever label anyone as a coward. Cowardice is not the quality of an individual, it’s how we all sometimes behave. A key element of

many dictionary definitions of cowardice includes behaviour reflecting excessive self-interest. Consider a trite, symbolic example of cowardice, where a soldier flees from a fight, leaving his comrades behind. Everyone feels fear in combat, yet someone must exude excessive self-interest to leave others.

In business, government, nonprofits, all organisations, people work with some degree of self-interest, that’s completely normal. It negatively impacts trust, however, when self-interest becomes excessive. It is far less important for leaders to be courageous than it is for them to simply not perform with excessive self-interest. The best leaders put their people first, especially in uncertainty.

MYTH 2: CONTROL IS NECESSARY FOR LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAINTY

Leaders can lose control due to uncertainty, but their effectiveness is not necessarily lost. Consider leadership in Ukrainian business during the war. Despite the trauma, teams across Ukraine reported something unexpected: They felt calmer and more connected than before the war. Employees said:

“My manager made me feel safe even though nothing was safe.”

“What helped most wasn’t information, it was

The generation of counter arguments naturally occurs when people are presented with an attempt at influence, like a proposal or an advertisement. Then our brains naturally and immediately generate counter arguments.

their calm tone.”

“I learned what real leadership looks like.”

Psychological safety is the backbone of functioning during the uncertainty of a crisis. It allows teams to think, communicate, and collaborate, even under missile attacks, displacement, or the uncertainty of each new day.

Emotional intelligence is structural, important for leaders. Leaders who

acknowledge fear, regulate their own emotions, and create safe psychological environments help their teams navigate through uncertainty.

MYTH 3: IN UNCERTAIN TIMES, ONE NEEDS A PLAN

Instead of using a plan vulnerable to uncertainty, it's more effective to delegate with an intent statement. Leader intent statements are composed of four types of information that trigger employees to act without further guidance:

1. **Purpose:** Leaders need to begin the intent statement by clarifying the purpose of the event or operation. Explain the 'why'.
2. **Methods:** If there are specific methods that the leader wishes to be used, they should be stated here. This is also the place to specify any tasks that must be performed.
3. **Risk:** Often, people limit their initiative because they fear retribution if things go wrong. This part of the intent statement is where leaders make clear what level of risk they are willing to accept and cover, and what outcomes they do not want occurring.

4. End state: It is important for the leaders and the led to share an understanding of what the successful end state will be.

Purpose, methods, risk, and end state form a box of opportunity to move forward without detailed plans or guidance—yet staying within the leader's aim. In uncertainty, the leader should keep the intent statement brief. Plans can take a long time to formulate—intent statements can be written in five minutes, with flexible executions during uncertainty.

MYTH 4: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR FAILURE LEADS TO CAREER LIMITATIONS

Uncertainty and crisis bring failures. I once had a significant failure, and called my boss to tell him so, saying “this is all my fault.” It led to what social psychologists call the generation of counter arguments.

The generation of counter arguments naturally occurs when people are presented with an attempt at influence, like a proposal or an advertisement. Then our brains naturally and immediately generate counter arguments. For example, if you would view an ad for a certain brand of ketchup, your brain would likely generate a counter argument against it, considering that another brand might be better.

When I told my boss that the problem was all my fault, the only counter arguments he could generate were, “No it's not only your fault, you have an assistant and others throughout our organisation.” He lessened my responsibility because I fully adhered to it. However, if I had tried to blame the problem on someone else, then what would his counter arguments have been? “Well, what am I paying you for?”

The leadership lesson: in uncertainty and crisis, always accept responsibility for what occurs in your organization, and if you err, err

on the side of taking responsibility, rather than denying it. Never trigger your boss into counter arguing why you are responsible, when you are claiming you are not.

MYTH 5: ORGANISATIONS HANDLE UNCERTAINTY, FAMILIES DO NOT

Families live with uncertainty—virtually all eventually deal with medical uncertainty. I needed expert help leading my family through the uncertainty of my daughter's heart transplant. I called a friend and mentor, Lieutenant General (retired) Eric Schoomaker, MD, PhD, formerly the Army Surgeon General. I explained the uncertainty, what I saw as mistakes and issues with doctors, and asked what to do. I was very surprised by what he said.

He said that there were no problems that were mine to fix. He made clear that despite the research I did to understand my daughter's condition, there was nothing that I had learned that would place me ahead of the medical

team's understanding of what needed to be done, and their ability to move forward. He said, "You have no job to do except to 'love your daughter'. Forget about medical diagnoses and medical decisions. Forget about trying to improve the performance of the transplant team. Love your daughter. That's your only job."

I thanked Eric and ended the call. Essentially, my leadership was to ignore uncertainty within my daughter's treatment, allowing the transplant team to deal with it independent of me. I was to focus emotionally on my daughter—loving her, exuding optimism, giving her support and confidence. It was faith in science, faith in medical professionalism, faith that assuming success would help lead to a positive outcome. Her transplant became a huge and lasting success. At times, the best form of leadership is love.

Uncertainty is palpable, pervasive, constant. Fix it with how you treat people. From intent delegation to love for family, you have the ability to win the challenge. Just do it! 





With water scarcity and climate change accelerating, the responsibility to build a sustainable future now rests on governments, businesses, and society alike.

◆ KRISHAN KALRA, CLIMATE PROJECT FOUNDATION INDIA

STRATEGY

A national emergency

A recent pink paper edit, citing a research report by Birbal Sahni Institute of Paleo Sciences came as another grave reminder about the way we are mindlessly hurtling towards a situation of ‘literally no water to drink’! This report says that “the last two decades have seen the driest spring seasons in the Western Himalayas since the early 1600s.” This historic collapse aligns with yet another catastrophic alert by International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) that 2025-26 HinduKush Himalaya (HKH) Snow update highlights a ‘snow drought’ triggered by weakened western disturbances and rising temperatures. Without the natural dam of slow-melting ice, the hydrological cycle has turned volatile. We have seen winters bringing flash floods while summers are left bone-dry. The heatwave seen in coastal cities like Mumbai and even North India is yet another grim peek into what is coming.

For a long time now, environmentalists have been cautioning humanity about depleting natural resources and the need for conservation. The whole world—with some exceptions like Denmark, Sweden, and Norway—led by the US

under President Trump, continues with a sort of death wish, hoping for a miracle or a radical scientific discovery to save us from the dire situation staring in the face. Scandinavia, the UK, Switzerland, France, Singapore, Canada, Chile, Morocco, etc. seem a little better prepared for what is coming and lead in framing suitable environmental policies. India—one of the most vulnerable regions—too has rapidly scaled solar and wind energy generation.

There are several dimensions to sustainability. Primarily we need to ensure availability of nutritious food, clothing, potable water, clean air, transportation, education and healthcare. All activities and industries involved in meeting these goals need energy and release emissions into the atmosphere, which cause pollution, climate change, health-related issues—the vicious cycle never ends!

Sustainability is a collective responsibility of governments, municipalities, industry, individuals, and society. Over the years, industry has started playing an increasing role. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) now figures prominently in all corporate annual reports. Industry uses 40-50 per cent of all power generated in the country, and profitability of all companies is directly related to how much they take care of environment,

STRATEGY

India has only 28 trees per capita as against almost 9,000 of Canada, 4,500 odd in Russia, 4,000 in Finland, over 700 in USA, and 100+ in China. We forget that trees play a big role in sequestering atmospheric carbon, cooling the parched earth, and also helping rainfall. Incidentally, the total rainfall in India is actually 3.5 to 4 times our total need of

water, but due to unfavourable geographical spread of the rains and our neglect of water harvesting, we are capturing only about 8-10 per cent of it, while the rest flows unutilised through storm drains, canals, and rivers into the seas. As a result, our ground water level continues to fall and in many cities has gone down to 700–1000 feet below ground.

their employees & society, and how well they govern systems, procedures, and the interest of all stakeholders.

Bet it the recent viral video of manufacturing jeans from banana stalks in China, the proven Israeli techniques for water conservation in agriculture, or the interesting article by convenor of the Bio Thermal Clean Cooking Alliance (BCCA) about scaling up use of ethanol for cooking, we have a ready framework to cut down our dependence on cotton, water, and LPG, respective. In the face of such encouraging out-of-the-box solutions, there are also sad cases of gross neglect in certain areas that negate the good efforts—the 20-year-old

growing mountain of waste at Bandhwari near Gurgaon and the rampant abuse of protected forest areas near Damdama Lake are examples.

While our respected Prime Minister is ably dousing geo-political fires all over the world, there is an urgent need to pay attention to criminal violation of environmental laws at home and thus denying people their right to clean air and water. We are already neck deep in the quicksand of sustainability failure and just cannot afford to waste any more time. Perhaps, the efforts of mega corporations will help greatly. Corporate sector now truly holds greater responsibility in this national emergency.**IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Krishan Kalra is Trustee, Climate Project Foundation India.



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