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AIMA ALL INDIA MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

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DRIVEN BY PURPOSE, POWERED BY STORIES

THE POWER OF PURPOSE
ZOË ARDEN

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Purpose and authentic storytelling together drive organisational success

By T.V. Narendran, CEO & MD, Tata Steel and President, All India Management Association (AIMA)

The most enduring organisations are remembered for more than their products, profits or scale. They are remembered for the role they play in people's lives, the trust they earn over time, and the way they respond when choices are difficult. Performance remains essential, but performance becomes stronger when it is anchored in a larger purpose.

Purpose gives an organisation its direction. It helps people make sense of choices, especially when the environment is uncertain or the decisions are difficult. It reminds everyone that business is about the value created for employees, customers, communities and society.

There is a reason stories survive. Long before institutions had strategy documents, dashboards or communication platforms, societies passed on values through stories. Stories carried memory, judgement and behaviour from one generation to the next.

But purpose has strength only when it is believed. It cannot remain a paragraph in an annual report. It has to be seen in the conduct of leaders, the priorities of the organisation, the way trade-offs are handled, and the way people experience the company every day. This is where authentic storytelling plays an important role.

Stories make purpose real. They take large ideas like trust, safety, innovation, resilience or sustainability and bring them closer to everyday work. A team that solves a customer's problem, an employee who stops unsafe work, a leader who takes a difficult call in line with values, or an organisation that stands by its people in a crisis—these become signals of what the organisation truly values.

There is a reason stories survive. Long before institutions had strategy documents, dashboards or communication platforms, societies passed on values through stories. Stories carried memory, judgement and behaviour from one generation to the next. They survived because they were easy to repeat and difficult to forget. The same is true in organisations. A policy may be read by a few people. A presentation may be remembered for a few days. But a good story travels across levels, functions and locations. It is repeated in meetings, shared in conversations, and remembered long after the formal communication is over.

In business, we rightly place a lot of emphasis on data. Data brings discipline and objectivity but data by itself does not always create belief. People remember stories because stories carry context and

meaning. They help stakeholders understand what the organisation wants to achieve and why it matters.

For many Indian organisations, purpose has deep roots. Some were shaped by nation-building, some by community development, some by entrepreneurship, technology or social change. The challenge today is to keep that purpose relevant.

Authentic storytelling is about recognising what is already true and communicating it honestly. The strongest stories come from real choices and real actions. They are remembered because people recognise them from their own experience.

This also means that action must come before communication. If the story runs ahead of reality, people see through it quickly. If leaders speak of trust, care, sustainability or customer focus, people must be able to see these values in everyday decisions. Credibility is built through consistency over time.

For many Indian organisations, purpose has deep roots. Some were shaped by nation-building, some by community development, some by entrepreneurship, technology or social change. The challenge today is to keep that purpose relevant. Younger employees and stakeholders respect legacy, but they also want to know how that legacy is being renewed for the future. They want to see how organisations are responding to technology, climate change, competitiveness, inclusion and changing expectations.

Ultimately, organisational success is built on strategy, execution and belief. Strategy sets the path. Execution delivers results. Belief gives people the energy to stay committed when the path is difficult. Purpose creates that belief, and authentic storytelling sustains it.

The opinion expressed is personal.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Organisations are judged not only by what they deliver, but by why they exist and how they communicate that purpose. Profit alone is no longer enough to earn stakeholder loyalty or build lasting credibility. Purpose has emerged as the foundation of organisational identity, guiding decisions, shaping values, and creating a shared sense of direction. When people understand the deeper mission behind their work, they are more engaged, motivated, and connected to the organisation's goals.

Equally important is the power of authentic storytelling. Stories humanise organisations by transforming abstract values into relatable experiences. They travel across teams, influence workplace culture, and reinforce behaviours that align with organisational purpose. Authentic stories build trust because they reflect honesty, consistency, and real human experiences rather than carefully crafted corporate messaging.

When purpose and storytelling work together, they create a strong emotional connection between organisations and their stakeholders. Employees become ambassadors, customers become advocates, and leaders inspire with clarity and credibility. In an age where transparency and trust are essential, organisations that communicate with authenticity and lead with purpose are better positioned to build resilient cultures, meaningful relationships, and sustainable long-term success.

As, Zoë Arden, author of *Story-Centred Leadership*, writes in the cover story of this issue, "Purpose gives organisations a reason to exist; stories give them a way to matter. When purpose and storytelling converge, they create a powerful force for change—one that inspires people, shapes culture, and drives impact."

Maneck Davar

Maneck Davar

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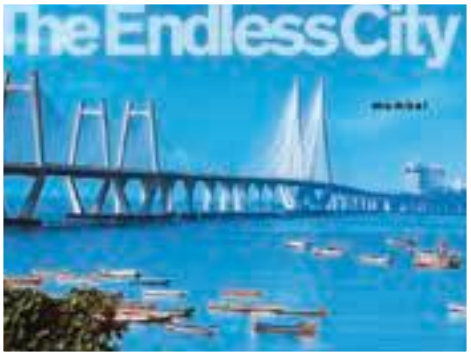

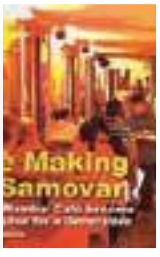

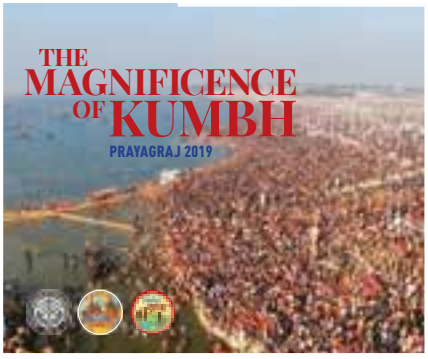

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The power of purpose

When purpose is clear, authentic storytelling turns it into real impact.

✦ ZOË ARDEN, AUTHOR, *STORY-CENTRED LEADERSHIP*

In an era where businesses are constantly challenged to adapt, innovate, and remain relevant, one element stands out as a timeless catalyst for transformation: purpose. When organisations articulate and live by a clear purpose, they not only inspire their stakeholders but also create a foundation for sustainable success. Yet, purpose alone is not enough. To truly resonate, it must be communicated in a way that connects deeply with people and that is where authentic storytelling comes in.

Why purpose matters more than ever

Purpose is the 'why' behind an organisation's existence. It transcends profit and speaks to the impact a company seeks to make on society, the environment and its stakeholders. In today's interconnected world, a myriad of stakeholders including customers, employees, investors increasingly expect organisations to stand for something meaningful. A well-defined purpose:

- Builds trust by signalling integrity and long-term commitment.
- Drives engagement by aligning employees with a shared mission.
- Differentiates brands in a crowded marketplace.

However, purpose cannot remain a statement on a website or a glossy annual report. It must be lived, experienced and most importantly, told through stories that feel real and relatable.

The science and soul of storytelling

Humans are wired for stories. Long before data and dashboards, stories were the primary way we made sense of the world. Neuroscience confirms that stories engage both the rational and emotional parts of the brain, making them far more persuasive and memorable than facts alone. As one leadership expert notes, 'We are narrative animals and stories can help us sense-make in ways that data and rational arguments often cannot.'

Stories do more than inform, they inspire action. They create shared meaning, foster empathy and make abstract concepts tangible. In the context of leadership and organisational change, storytelling becomes a powerful lever to:

- Communicate vision in a way that excites and mobilizes people.
- Bridge divides by connecting diverse stakeholders through common values.

- Accelerate change by making the future feel real and achievable.

Authenticity: The non-negotiable ingredient

Not all stories are created equal. In an age of scepticism and information overload, authenticity is the currency of trust. Authentic storytelling is rooted in truth, transparency, and vulnerability. It is not about spinning a narrative to look good; it is about sharing real experiences, including successes, failures and lessons learned.

Authentic stories often answer three critical questions: Why do we exist? What do we believe in and how are we living those beliefs every day? When leaders share their personal 'why', they humanise the organization and invite others to join the journey. This openness builds credibility and fosters a sense of belonging.

Storytelling as a cultural catalyst

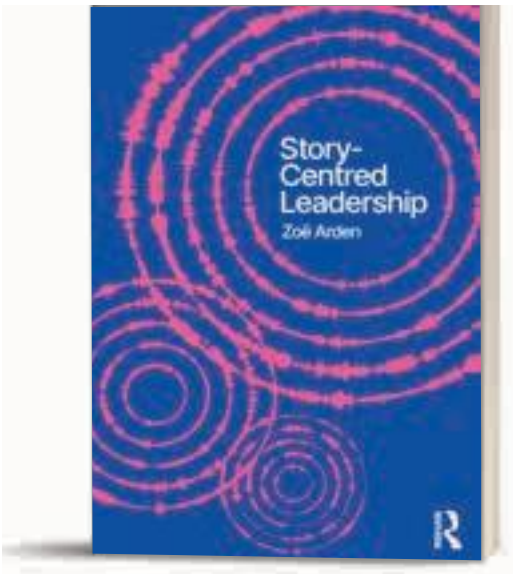
Storytelling is not just a communication tool; it is a cultural force. According to Dave Snowden, creator of the Cynefin framework, 'Storytelling is not an optional extra but the very source of culture.' Managed and purposeful storytelling can reveal the true heart of an organisation—something that polished speeches or mission statements often fail to do.

Snowden identifies the following key features of purposeful stories:

- They capture attention and hold it.
- They self-propagate, taking on a life of their own.
- They are inclusive, resonating across roles, background, and experiences.
- They provide a new language for understanding, helping organisations navigate complexity.

The double-edged nature of stories

While stories are powerful, they are not



silver bullets and need to be used with care. Stories can be used to spin, distract, or deceive, leading to superficial engagement or even manipulation. Over-reliance on storytelling without substance can backfire, eroding trust instead of building it. Therefore, organisations must ensure that their stories are anchored in reality and backed by consistent action.

From purpose to impact: Practical steps for leaders

How can leaders harness the power of authentic storytelling to drive change? Here are five actionable strategies:

1. **Start with clarity of purpose:** Before telling stories, ensure your organization's purpose is clear, compelling, and aligned with stakeholder expectations. Ask yourself and your team: What positive difference do we want to make in the world?
2. **Unearth real stories:** Look within your organisation for stories that exemplify your purpose in action. For example, employees going the extra

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mile, customers whose lives were changed, communities impacted by your initiatives. These stories are often hiding in plain sight.

3. **Empower storytellers:** Storytelling should not be confined to the C-suite. Encourage employees at all levels to share their experiences. This democratises the narrative and makes it more authentic.
4. **Use multiple platforms:** From town halls and newsletters to social media and podcasts, leverage diverse channels to share stories. Adapt the format to suit the audience but keep the essence intact.
5. **Measure and evolve:** Track how stories are received. Are they inspiring engagement, driving behaviour change and building a purpose-led culture? Use feedback to refine your approach and keep the narrative fresh.

Case in point: Purpose-driven campaigns

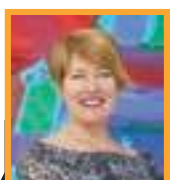
Global movements like TED Countdown and initiatives by organisations such as Leaders' Quest demonstrate the transformative power of storytelling. By spotlighting individual stories on issues like climate change and social justice, these platforms have mobilised multiple organisations to take action and influence policy.

The Indian context

In India, where businesses operate in a complex socio-economic landscape, authentic storytelling can be a game-changer. Whether it is a startup championing sustainability or a legacy brand embracing digital transformation, stories rooted in purpose can bridge the gap between aspiration and action. They can also help organisations navigate cultural diversity, build trust in rural markets, and engage a young, socially conscious workforce.

Conclusion: Stories as agents of change

Purpose gives organisations a reason to exist; stories give them a way to matter. When purpose and storytelling converge, they create a powerful force for change—one that inspires people, shapes culture, and drives impact. In a world hungry for meaning, the organisations that master authentic storytelling will not only survive but thrive. IM



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoë Arden is a leadership expert, Fellow at the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership. Zoë is also author, *Story-Centred Leadership: Crafting Cultures of Change.*

Innovation thrives not in limitless freedom, but within clearly defined boundaries that focus creativity and drive meaningful progress, opines Sheri Jacobs, FASAE, CAE, President and CEO, Avenue M Group and author, *Unexpected Power of Boundaries*.

MYTH BUSTER

The real innovation risk

Boundaries are not the enemy of creativity; limitless thinking is. In leadership conversations, few ideas are as reflexively praised—or as poorly understood—as the call to 'think outside the box'. Leaders are told to remove constraints, embrace unlimited freedom, and let creativity run free. Innovation, we are assured, requires tearing down the fence.

This framing is not only inaccurate. It is counterproductive.

Boundaries are not the enemy of innovation. 'Limitless thinking' is.

After more than twenty years of working with organisations across nearly every industry, and surveying nearly half a million professionals, I have observed the same dynamic over and over again. Without clearly defined edges, creativity dwindles, exploration wanes, and everyone stays in a loop of convention. When people don't know where the fences lie, they stick to what they know. They play small and safe. More to the point, they fail to adapt, compete, and grow.

Yet under pressure, leaders continue reaching for the same tired playbook: remove all limits and hope something brilliant emerges. What follows are five myths I have encountered repeatedly in my work with startups, associations, and Fortune 500 companies—myths that keep organisations stuck.

MYTH 1: INNOVATION REQUIRES FREEDOM FROM CONSTRAINTS.

The belief that creativity flourishes only in the absence of rules is one of the most persistent misconceptions in business. I have found the opposite is often true. Over the past 10 years, I have conducted research involving more than 18,000 professionals, including physicians, city planners, lawyers, executives, and scientists. I asked: what are your biggest professional challenges and what are the barriers to overcoming them?

Again and again, I found that when people operate without clear boundaries, they feel overwhelmed, they default to the familiar,

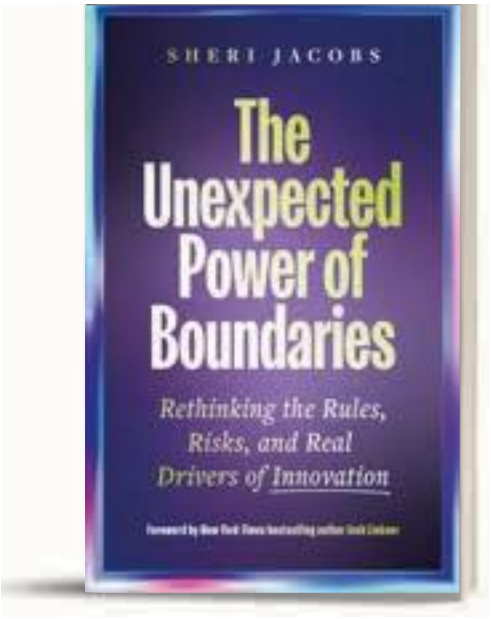
they're more likely to become burned out, and they don't push for new ideas. Ambiguity about what constitutes 'acceptable risk' leads people to hold back. My research also showed 'information overload', and the 'need to keep up with too much change' without tools or clarity frequently led to greater demand for guidance and direction—not more tools, but clearer frameworks.

MYTH 2: 'THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX' IS SOUND LEADERSHIP ADVICE.

Many brainstorming meetings start the same way. Someone suggests their team needs to 'think outside the box'. It is said when people are stuck. It is said when ideas stall. It is shared like it is the highest form of creative wisdom. But I believe this is the worst advice we could ever give to people. From my observations, the problem isn't that we are too boxed in. The problem is that we don't know where the box is at all.

I often share a story about a landscape architect student, Peter Summerlin, who was curious about the impact boundaries have on how children play. Do boundaries limit their freedom of expression and creativity or provide a safe zone for exploration? To find out, he conducted an experiment. He asked a group of preschool teachers to bring their students to two parks in their town. Both parks had swings, slides, and a large grassy area surrounding the playground. One park, however, had a fence that enclosed the space while the other had no visible boundary. It turns outs, that when the children had unlimited freedom to explore but no boundary, they stayed on the playground and repeated the same activities again. However, when they were brought to the park with the fence, they explored and were more creative in their play.

The same dynamic plays out in organisations every day. Vague directives like 'push the limits'



fall flat because even the most creative minds need to first understand the boundaries and strategic priorities. We should not be asking our teams to think outside the box. We should be giving them a better box—one with clear edges about where they can experiment, fail, and discover.

MYTH 3: MORE OPTIONS LEAD TO BETTER OUTCOMES.

I once facilitated a strategic planning session for a healthcare organisation whose board had created a three-year plan with thirty-five objectives spread across seven goals. Every director had a pet project. In trying to accommodate all viewpoints, they ended up with an unwieldy wish list rather than an actionable strategy. The result was stalled projects, employee burnout, and a team stretched so thin that nothing moved forward with any real momentum.

This is what I call the 'abundance trap'. Too many opportunities without enough limits tends to overwhelm and paralyse teams rather

than empower them. My colleague Elena Gerstmann once said seven words that have stayed with me: You can do anything, but not everything. Success comes not just from what you choose to do, but equally from what you deliberately choose not to do. When we helped that organisation narrow to three focused priorities, they emerged from the pandemic stronger than their counterparts.

MYTH 4: RISK-TAKING IS ABOUT COURAGE AND TOLERANCE.

Organisations talk endlessly about risk tolerance but rarely about risk capacity. The distinction matters. Risk tolerance is subjective and emotional. It fluctuates with your mood, your last quarter's results, and other emotional factors. Risk capacity is grounded in objective, measurable facts: your financial reserves, your timeline, your reputation capital, and the diversity of your revenue streams. When leaders confuse the two, they either freeze from fear or overextend from false confidence.

Consider SurePayroll, a startup I worked with in its early days. We ran a co-branded campaign with Citibank that included mailing three hundred thousand targeted offers to small business owners in the monthly bank statement. Although we had a 100 per cent open rate and the credibility from co-branding with a trusted partner, the results were telling. We received three calls and one customer. But because SurePayroll had defined its boundaries in advance—a clear hypothesis and a predetermined understanding that their scarcest resource was time—the decision to pull the plug was immediate. No agonising. No "let's tweak it." We redirected to direct sales, SurePayroll became the world's largest online payroll company, and was eventually acquired by Paychex. That is what real creative boundaries look like: intentional lines that allow you to test with clarity and let go without regret.

MYTH 5: BOUNDARIES STIFLE A CULTURE OF EXPERIMENTATION

Most people in organisations are not looking to shake things up. They are trying to stay employed. A former global product lead at Google once told me that the company's most established teams—responsible for products like Search and Cloud—had become risk averse precisely because they had too much at stake. Meanwhile, a small internal team of eight people, given clear boundaries around time, resources, and scope, produced genuinely innovative work. They could take as many shots as they wanted without fear of disrupting something big.

This is the concept I call 'bounded psychological safety': the combination of emotional trust and strategic clarity. Innovation does not thrive in limitless environments; it thrives where rules are well defined and failure is both expected and accepted. When people know the strategic boundaries, understand the expectations, and feel genuinely safe to speak up, they start to explore. They try. They stretch. They get creative in ways that actually move the organisation forward.

THE REALITY LEADERS MUST CONFRONT

Innovation is not about removing all limits. It is about designing better ones.

The leaders and organisations that succeed are not the ones who tear down every fence. They are the ones who understand that a fence around the park does not keep children from playing. It is the very thing that lets them play freely. They define the 'what'—the goal and the boundaries—and leave the 'how' unscripted.

When leaders get clear about where and why they encourage experimentation, and they create a culture where people feel safe to speak up, extraordinary ideas begin to surface. People stop hesitating and start experimenting. That is where real innovation takes root—not outside the box, but inside a better one. IM

Armaan Hoyvoy

From George P. Mitchell's shale breakthrough to ISRO's space success, bold national goals show how vision and persistence can drive India toward energy independence.

✦ R S RAJESH

STRATEGY

The 'BHAG' Imperative

In early 1980, George P Mitchell, founder of Mitchell Energy, a Houston-based oil & gas producer, was a worried man as the natural gas volumes were declining due to natural field depletion and he was not sure where he could find the additional gas to supply the contracted volumes. Three decades later, Mitchell's relentless commitment and perseverance paid off which transformed the North American natural gas market through commercialisation of shale gas. He had decoded the shale gas production through hydro-fracking and horizontal drilling. This is the story of a highly visionary person and his energy company that defied all odds for 30 years and finally produced gas from shale rock. This is what is called 'BHAG'—Big Hairy Audacious goal. BHAG unifies the entire company (team) to unilaterally focus on that one audacious long-term goal which happens to be the unifying and compelling factor. These are no ordinary goals.

Today, India needs a BHAG moment. It is facing insurmountable energy crisis with its energy supplies heavily dependent on imports. The geopolitical tensions makes the country all the more vulnerable. So, now we ask, what is it that a company requires to achieve BHAG and Bingo it all starts with the political leadership of the country stating the BHAG which is adopted by the companies and institutions of higher learning in their vision statement. In developing countries, it is vital for political leadership to state the BHAG as suitable framework – Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal & Environment (PESTLE) has to evolve and support these critical strategic long term objectives. The collaboration between the political leadership, Government, companies, colleges and university is vital for the success of BHAG.

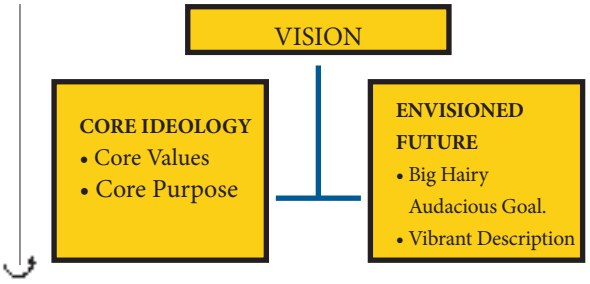
Vision statement and BHAG

A well-conceived vision of a company that aspires to achieve BHAG consists of two major components: core ideology and envisioned future.

1. Core ideology: is unchanging and is a source of inspiration and guidance. It consists of two distinct parts:
   - Core values, a system of guiding tenets and

principles; No change to it ever.
- Core purpose, the organisations fundamental reason for existence.

2. Envisioned future is what we aspire to create and become. It consists of Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG) which will require 10 - 30 years' work to achieve and a vibrant description of what it will be like to achieve BHAG.



Corporate examples that achieved BHAG

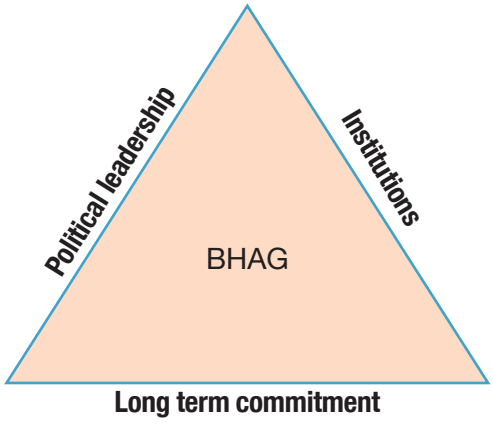
I have listed the vision statement and the BHAG moment for one international E & P Company, one EV mobility Company, one new generation AI Company and an Indian Space organization.

Company Name	Vision	Mission	Purpose	Core Values	BHAG Moment
	Guiding light, What we want to accomplish, qualitative	**Why we exist, outlines what the company does?**	**Fundamental reason for existence**	**Guiding tenets and principles**	
Exxon Mobil	Lead industry in innovations that advance modern living and a net-zero future.		Create sustainable solutions that improve quality of life and meet society's evolving needs.	Integrity – Be honest and ethical and do what is right. Care – Be respectful, look after each other, and contribute for the wellbeing of community and environment. Courage – take initiative and make difference, think boldly and act with conviction and take personal ownership Excellence – Hold ourselves to highest standards and be thoughtful, thorough and disciplined. Resilience – Be determined and preserve. Be purposeful and determined in our principles.	Exxon drilling the longest ERD well in Sakhalin – 1.The total measured depth was 12.345 Km with a horizontal reach of 11.475 kms. It enabled drilling from Onshore location to reach an offshore oil and gas reservoir. It pushed the engineering boundaries to the limits in pursuit of energy resources. This was an innovative technology as stated in its vision statement.
Tesla			Primary objective To accelerate the worlds transition to sustainable energy.	• Conducting business with Integrity • Strict compliance to law & regulation • Human values and respect • Protect Tesla data and assets • Trust in what we do	Pioneers in Transportation using sustainable renewable energy. They are accelerating the transition to renewable energy.
Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO)	Harness, sustain and augment space technology for national development, while pursuing space science research and planetary exploration.	Space based application for societal development Design & development of launch vehicles, satellites. Promote private players for key roles in space research and market.	**Objectives:** Operate PSLV, GSLV and SSLV. Design and development of space related applications. Education, Training, space infrastructure development.		They developed telecommunication, television broadcasting, earth observation, navigation, meteorology and other space related technologies. Indian societal changes has been phenomenal. An Indian company which has achieved BHAG in the Indian context.
OpenAI		Our mission is to ensure that artificial general intelligence benefits all of humanity.	OpenAI has charter which could be a guiding light or the purpose. Broadly distributed safety – AGI used for the benefit of all and will be egalitarian. Long term safety – Committed to research to make AGI safe. Technical leadership - To be effective at addressing AGI's impact on society, OpenAI must be on the cutting edge of AI capabilities—policy and safety advocacy alone would be insufficient. Cooperative orientation - We will actively cooperate with other research and policy institutions; we seek to create a global community working together to address AGI's global challenges.		Creation of safe artificial general intelligence to benefit humanity. Result: Open AI with LLM and chat GPT has set the world on the path to the next level of innovation.

My thoughts on BHAG

- BHAG should be stated and steadfastly guided by the political leadership of the country. Political leadership should lay the ground work for the creation of such companies and intellectual support environment through the colleges and universities. Kennedy in the 1960's challenging the Americans to put a man on the moon by the end of that decade.
- BHAG moments are those feats that have not been achieved and will have tremendous value to the country and humanity.
- It may take decades but the perseverance should be rock solid.
- One of the BHAG moments for India could be self-reliance in energy requirement with the adoption of nuclear energy. Extensive research and development will be needed in this field, particularly in spent fuel disposal, engineering and construction of nuclear reactors (Thorium based). The slogan could be "Let's electrify the economy". Energy independence through large scale electrification of the economy. Currently India is heavily dependent on fossil fuels for its energy requirements. The crude oil and LPG imports are at record high of 88 per cent and 80 per cent respectively. India imports 36 BCM of Natural gas which is almost same as the domestic gas production. These numbers and ratios have to change to make India a Viksit Bharat by 2047 which is the vision of the political leadership.
- One company which comes to my mind in achieving BHAG in the Indian context is Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). This organisation was founded in 1969 and launched its first satellite, Aryabhata, in 1975 to Chandrayan – 3 and Aditya L1 in 2023. It is a good example of political leadership standing and supporting the space ecosystems, even today.
- The BHAG moment will give a mighty boost to innovation, discovery and industrial development. It will provide a guiding light to achieve the next level of excellence by climbing up the value chain.

Conclusion



The three pillars of BHAG are shown above as the sides of the triangle which combines leadership goals, human intelligence and commitment. The political leadership has already come out with a vision document called Viksit Bharat 2047 to make India a developed country by 2047. A national objective to make India energy self-reliant will catalyse research, investment and industrial development in the ensuing decades. We have to go up the value chain. When nations commit themselves to such goals, transformation is inevitable. The ISRO example given above is a BHAG moment. Let us replicate it. IM

References:

The Quest by Daniel Yergin

My classes in IIFT, Delhi for introduction to the BHAG terminology.

Internet resources of Exxon Mobil, Open AI, Tesla & ISRO for their vision theme.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Armaan Hoyvoy

: Inclusive leadership is about leveraging discomfort to confront our biases, build trust, and grow.

✦ DR POORNIMA LUTHRA, AUTHOR, *CAN I SAY THAT?*

Discomfort drives inclusion

When it comes to both work and life, none of us enjoys discomfort. Most of us will find every means to remove ourselves from uncomfortable situations or change the circumstances to move to a state of comfort. We are creatures of habit and routine who enjoy staying in our comfort zone.

It's this fear of discomfort that holds us back from engaging in diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. No one wants to be in a conversation where they feel uncomfortable. No one wants to be in a conversation where they feel guilt or shame. No one wants to be in a conversation where they are made to feel like they are 'bad'.

We may feel exposed when our biases are pointed out, or even persecuted. We may feel like we are not good people because of our biased actions or words. We may feel rejected by champions of DEI because we said or did something that was biased, even though we believe in what DEI stands for.

Once we have become aware of this, however, the question is – how do we use it to become more inclusive leaders?

The answer involves addressing the root cause of the fear of discomfort – knowing that we are biased like everyone else. This is why inclusive leadership actually starts with discomfort, rather than a confidence that we know everything and we're getting it right. It's key to acknowledge this discomfort, because it's only then that we can make meaningful steps towards transformation.

Becoming aware of biases

It's likely that when we think of 'bias' we have an image in our mind. Perhaps it is of someone overtly racist wearing a robe and white hat, or someone who engages in blatant sexism. We probably associate being biased with extreme behaviour and negativity, or being 'bad'.

Remember, however, that everyone is biased. We all rely on those mental shortcuts to help us categorise information. Our biases—consciously or unconsciously—influence our words, actions, and decisions.

And yet, we often feel ashamed and guilty of being biased. Most of us want to be seen as being fair and rational, when in reality,

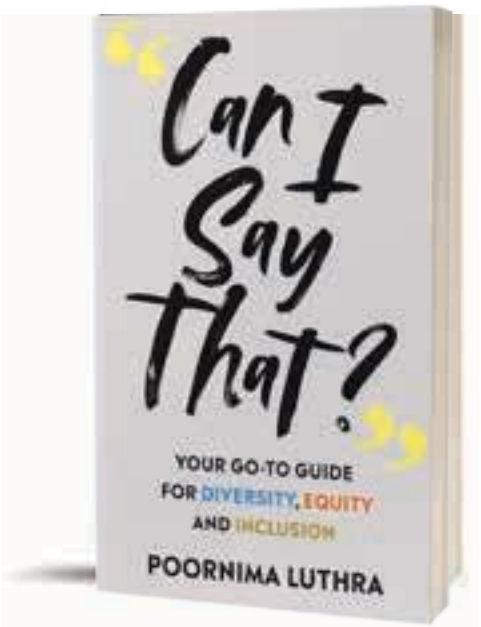
many of us are not. Because we associate 'bias' with 'bad', we get uncomfortable when we realise we hold biases against others or when our biases are pointed out to us.

This discomfort holds us back. It stops us from becoming aware of our biases, which is the only way we can block their influence on how we engage with others and make decisions. We may get uncomfortable when we realise our privilege or begin to recognise how many of the systems, structures and culture around us are biased to favour us and not others. We may get uncomfortable when our non-inclusive behaviours are pointed out or questioned.

But what if we reframed how we looked at discomfort? After all, it is in these moments of discomfort that trust is formed, and trust is fundamental to human interactions. Without trust, our interactions with each other are plagued with discomfort. But here's the thing—we are most comfortable trusting the people who are like or similar to us. Trusting people who are different from us and beyond our closest circle of friends and colleagues is often uncomfortable.

To nurture inclusion, we have to embrace the discomfort we feel and have difficult conversations about our biases and the discrimination around us. This discomfort is the very thing that will help us to build trust with people beyond our closest circles. If we begin to view the discomfort we experience when engaging in DEI as a way to gain trust, then that discomfort has positive value. What if we become comfortable with the discomfort so that we can be more inclusive?

In allowing ourselves the grace and space to sit with the discomfort that comes from examining our biases, the desire to make change happen is born. In letting in discomfort, we can start moving towards inclusive leadership.



Opportunities for learning and growth

One of the most uncomfortable situations to be in is when our own bias or act of discrimination is pointed out. It is very likely that we respond with defensiveness: "But I'm a good person"; avoidance: "This is making me uncomfortable, please stop"; or even leaving the conversation: "This is too much for me".

Instead of reacting that way, how can we engage in a conversation that is an opportunity for learning and growth? Remember, as said before, discomfort is inevitable. Instead, we need to learn to leverage it to do better. Below are some good practices.

- Listen more intently and limit interruptions. Practise active and intentional listening to understand rather than to respond. If you want to be an inclusive leader, friend or

colleague, learning how to listen without interrupting someone, finishing their sentence or wanting to justify, defend or offer a solution is important.

- Don't get defensive and don't dismiss the other person's concerns. Show empathy and be willing to engage in an open conversation. Remember to decentre yourself.
- Acknowledge that you recognise that what you said or did has had a negative impact.
- Apologise without over-apologising. Don't muddle your apology with the fact that you believe you are a good person, or that your actions were well-intentioned.
- Ask questions to understand more. Remember the power of questions. Ask open-ended questions such as "Can you tell me more about…"'
- Respond in a way that shows that you are willing to reflect and take their feedback into account to be more inclusive in the future. To diffuse tension and manage the impact such a conversation can have on our personal ego, have a catchphrase handy. My favourite that I use when my biases are pointed out is, "Good catch, thanks for pointing this out. I will try to do better." Find your own in your own communication style.
- Take time to introspect honestly and deeply. Being curious is helpful here. It may not be clear to you why what you said or did caused harm, so make the effort to educate yourself to unlearn what you thought was acceptable and learn to be more inclusive. Through curiosity, we expand our understanding about the bias and discrimination around us, which enables us to start seeing the moments when our biases are pointed out as an opportunity for growth and self-development.
- Expand your circle to include people with varied backgrounds and life experiences. Get comfortable with multiple perspectives and life experiences.

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Acknowledging discomfort to bring about change

Being an inclusive leader means being open-minded and reflective to explore our own fears. Yes, there will be lots of moments of discomfort, but we need to sit with them. Resist the temptation to brush it off or suppress it.

As Seth Godin wrote in his book Linchpin: Are You Indispensable, "Discomfort brings engagement and change." So, in order to change ourselves and enable change around us towards being more inclusive, equitable and open to diversity, we need to first recognise and acknowledge the discomfort that arises when engaging in DEI. It's when our attitude to DEI comes from this place of discomfort, rather than confidence, that we can truly become more inclusive leaders. IM

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Armaan Hoyvoy

In an age where AI is reshaping the role of middle management, what must leaders do to remain relevant?

✦ RAJEEV KUMAR MEHAJAN, PHD, NOBLEGENICS TRUST

The vanishing middle

In one of my recent interactions with business professionals on an informal, cross-disciplinary forum M.A.D.D. (Marketing Academy for Discussion and Debate), where practitioners from marketing, media, advertising, research, and design engage in candid, idea-driven conversations—the founder, a college-time friend, posed a deceptively simple question: "If AI can analyse, recommend, and even decide—where do professionals like us truly add value?"

The room fell silent—not for lack of answers, but because the question seemed to resonate far beyond the room itself.

We are, perhaps quietly, entering an era where AI is not merely augmenting human capability, it is beginning to redefine the very architecture of organisations. And in that process, one layer is feeling the heat more than most: the middle layer of management.

For decades, this 'middle' has been the connective tissue of organisations, that is translating strategy into execution, aligning teams, monitoring performance, and ensuring continuity. It has been both a stabiliser and an enabler.

But AI is now beginning to assume many of these very functions. From data-driven decision support to workflow optimisation, from performance analytics to predictive insights, AI systems are increasingly capable of doing what middle management was traditionally entrusted with. The implications, as I see it, are not merely technological; they are deeply structural.

Contrary to the popular perception, the question, therefore, is not whether the middle will disappear entirely—it is whether it will remain relevant in its current form.

From control to contextip

One of the most significant shifts I have observed in the industry today is the movement from control-driven management to context-driven leadership. In the past, value was often derived from access to information, oversight, and the ability to 'Interpret', 'Integrate', and 'Implement'. Today, information is democratised, systems are integrated, and coordination is increasingly automated.

What cannot be automated, however is, tolerance and judgment in ambiguity, ethical decision-making, and the ability to inspire collective purpose. This is where

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leadership at the mid-level must evolve.

The 'middle' of the future cannot merely be a conduit of instructions. It must become a creator of context—someone who helps teams navigate uncertainty, interpret complexity, and align with a larger purpose beyond immediate tasks.

The risk of hollowing out

There is a growing risk that organisations, in their pursuit of efficiency or cutting costs, may unintentionally hollow out the very layer that nurtures leadership pipelines.

Middle management has traditionally been the space where individual professionals:

- Lead teams towards measurable outcomes
- Make decisions with limited information
- Balance competing priorities

If this layer is compressed without being reimagined, we may face a paradox: highly efficient organisations with fragile leadership depth. This is not a distant concern! It is already beginning to surface in subtle ways.

A personal reflection

In my own journey across scientific and institutional systems, one pattern has become increasingly evident: Technology often advances faster than the systems and the people within them—are prepared to absorb it.

Following the Global AI Summit in February 2026, I had reflected in a recent article in 'The ET-Education' vertical that while much of the conversation focuses on capability, far less attention is paid to preparedness—of individuals, institutions, and leadership frameworks.

What I have now come to realise is that adaptation cannot be limited to tools. It must

extend to mind-sets, roles, and the very philosophy of leadership.

In my own experience across national organisations, I have seen that even the most robust systems deliver outcomes only when individuals feel enabled, trusted, and aligned to a larger purpose.

Reimagining the middle

The way forward is not to resist this shift, but to redefine the role of the middle.

This redefinition may include:

- Moving from task supervision to talent development
- From process enforcement to problem framing
- From performance monitoring to purpose alignment

In essence, the middle must transition from being a manager of work to a multiplier of people. I have seen this first-hand during my years in the Indian Air Force, where success was never defined merely by meeting targets, but by enabling teams to perform with precision and reliability. This was often in environments where something as critical as flight safety depended on collective ownership rather than individual effort.

In this evolving context, I see the 'middle' as the organisation's most critical AAA—an Appreciator, Absorber and Adapter—not merely of tasks, but of change itself: appreciating its implications, absorbing its complexity, and adapting it into meaningful action. It should be often acting as the bridge between intent and execution.

The new leadership imperative

As AI continues to reshape the contours of work, leadership will be judged not by how efficiently processes are managed, but by how effectively human potential is enabled.

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In my own experience across national organisations, I have seen that even the most robust systems deliver outcomes only when individuals feel enabled, trusted, and aligned to a larger purpose.

Organisations that recognise this early, I believe, will not just adapt—they will lead the transition. Because in the age of intelligent systems, the true differentiator will not be intelligence alone, but the ability to humanise it.

A closing reflection

The middle is not vanishing. It is, in many ways, being invited to evolve.

What is disappearing is not the layer itself, but the comfort of its old identity.

A more demanding role is emerging—one that must make sense of change, enable people through it, and hold together the human fabric of organisations in an increasingly complex and competitive world.

The future, therefore, may not belong to those who manage the middle in this AI-driven order—but to those who can meaningfully redefine it. In that redefinition lies the true test of leadership. IM

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Armaan Hoyvoy

Economic growth alone will not make India developed—strong grassroots governance, accountability, and respect for the rule of law must lead the way.

✦ KRISHAN KALRA

Grassroots governance

In the run up to meet our national target of becoming a 'developed country' by 2047, we need to attend to several essentials aspects other than increasing GDP, especially per capita GDP, one of the crucial issues being 'good governance' at all levels. Shashi Budhiraja (1931-2025), in his seminal book The *Governance Gap* lays great emphasis on 'robust institutions & good governance' for unlocking the country's true growth potential. He starts his treatise with "even though India is the world's largest democracy, is real power held by its people or by those who govern them?" He raises embarrassing questions like, "Are our much celebrated elections free of money and muscle power?" and "How well are we managing the dreams and aspirations of 1.4 billion *Bharatiyas*?" A technocrat, who had steered several private sector and government institutions and also had stints with the World bank & UN, Shashi was indeed qualified to notice chinks in our governance systems.

Civil disobedience- The need for tough action

The tragic death of 25 people at the Goa night club inferno, on the night of 6 December 2025 night, yet again brought forth the issue of gaps in our governance and how people get away with brazen lack of respect for laws of the land. Another high profile case of a somewhat similar nature was the death-by-drowning of three young IAS aspirants in a case of flooding in a well-known 'coaching school' in Rajendra Nagar, New Delhi, on 27 July 2024. For a week or so, the tragedy made headlines in the papers before it apparently died down with the municipal corporation, fire department, police, and others 'concerned with licensing of a commercial venture in a basement and checking validity of fire department clearance, etc.' blaming each other till the files were probably put on the back burner due to 'lack of evidence'.

Fortunately, it now seems the case was not closed. Due to persistent follow up by the families of the deceased, Delhi government issued show cause notices to as many as 505 coaching centres and 394 libraries all flouting safety norms. This awakening is most welcome as most of the time cases involving criminal defiance of civic rules—those of the fire departments, municipal corporations, elevator safety officials, those responsible for chocked/blocked drainage pipes and other such services—get away

with token fines and warnings. Of course, we are all aware that such negligence has the potential to put the citizens at great risk of life and property.

How many more deaths we want to see?

I still remember the horrible case, perhaps around October 2024, on Gurgaon's prestigious Golf Course Road. Early morning a guy, displaying some party flag on his SUV, was tearing down on wrong side of the road and knocked down a young man on his scooter. The passers-by didn't let him get away; he apologised in front of a police man, saying, "I was in hurry." He was arrested on the spot, but made just one call to someone, and got bail the same day. Meantime, the victim—21-year-old sole breadwinner in his family—was rushed to the hospital, but lost his life.

Why do we overrule the orders of local bodies and panchayats

Don't the owners and management of the Goa Night club deserve exemplary punishment? Ironically, the local *panchayat* had decided to raze the club almost two years ago—acting on a complaint that the establishment lacked a construction licence and mandatory NOC from the fire and emergency services department—but the owners managed to get a government order to stay the panchayat decision.

Don't the concerned government officers merit summary dismissal? Unfortunately, this is where—grassroots panchayat level—we are going wrong. We need to strengthen our grassroots governance, empower the *panchayats*, and local municipal bodies because they know their respective localities better than the senior functionaries sitting in the Secretariat) in the state capital. We need to elect our *panchs* scrupulously, without intervention from above and without money power. Once we have the right persons in place, they must be empowered and encouraged to take decisions without fear and solely based on facts on the ground. Once they know that their decisions are honoured, they will become even more careful.

Even for minor offences, such as spitting and littering on the road need to be dealt with strictly. Such punitive actions will need serious tweaking of our laws, but it is a much-needed exercise. We cannot allow innocent people to die because irresponsible ones would not change their ways. We can't let public roads be made dirty because people have no civic sense. Gross neglect of laws of the land is a very serious matter and must be stopped irrespective of the steps that need to be taken.

Our virtually 'continental economy' is very difficult to govern. Our government is judged harshly from within. Public dissects every word and scrutiny never stops. But someone has to point out the 'huge gaps in our grassroots governance', that must be patched if we are serious about becoming a 'developed nation'! Let us try to create that fearless situation at the level of panchayats and municipal committees. Once it shows good results, we should then move up the ladder and clean up the entire system.

We owe this to the people of India. As I have mentioned earlier many times, 'management' should not be restricted to schools, universities, and the corporate world; it has to continuously touch the lives of people of the country and make them feel safer. IIMs run courses now about many societal subjects; so why shouldn't management associations also pitch in with all these 'nation building efforts? IM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Krishan Kalra is a past president of AIMA.

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