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**Art of Leading**

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## "An Ability To Thrive In Difficult Situations Is A Learnable Skill"

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***Ravi Kumar**, the president of Infosys, shared key leadership lessons in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to get future installments.*

**Q. Tell me about your early years.**

A. I grew up in India. My father was a professor, and he always had this belief that you have to work hard. I actually wandered a little bit in my early years. I didn't really do well in school, so I was pretty much without a mission or goal early on.

But I started to find my purpose in my first job. I have this unique experience profile. I started as a nuclear scientist, based on my degree in chemical engineering, and every job I did after that has had no connection to the previous job. I did my MBA, went into management consulting, then sales, and then to Infosys.

I have an ability to be very comfortable in uncomfortable situations. Being very curious has been my strength. Initially, when I would start a new role, I thought that asking stupid questions was bad. Now I use them to develop hypotheses early on about strategy. That has helped me to challenge the status quo, and my teams expect that from me.

**Q. Where does that level of comfort in discomfort come from for you?**

A. Normally, the way we make decisions is based on the comfort of conviction. But if you're making a decision based on ticking all the right boxes, you will never have the entrepreneur spirit because you end up being more of a procedural or administrative leader.

Most leaders develop a comfort of conviction once they have a confidence level of 70 to 80 percent that something is going to work. Once they do, then they get behind an idea.

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comfort of doubt.*

I have this innate desire to thrive in the comfort of doubt, and build hypotheses that I then test and use to experiment. If I see they are working, then we double down on them. Infosys provides a unique opportunity to test hypotheses and validate them, because it's such a huge platform.

It's one thing to have a big and unconventional idea, but what I'm learning more is that the challenge is to then make everybody else believe what you are seeing. The force-multiplier effect will only happen if you build that level of trust with your teams.

**Q. How do you get people to be open to the prospect of change when status quo is such a powerful force?**

A. There is always going to be a group who will be able to connect the dots and understand the hypothesis you have created. There are some who will test that hypothesis in their own way, and then they will come onto your side. And there are some who will always be left behind. You will never be able to convert them.

There people who are the fence are the group that you need to focus on, because they are often the biggest group. You have to build a network effect with them, so that the people who are already on board will help you convince them.

**Q. What are other key lessons you've learned about leadership?**

A. Keeping an open mind is a teachable skill. If I look back at my own career, I think I'm now more open to new ideas and diverse thinking than I was a decade ago. The ability to learn is a teachable skill, and I think an ability to thrive in difficult situations is a learnable skill. These are two things I've always been fascinated about.

*We are often too wired to use the assumptions  
based on our past experience.*

Another approach I have is that when teams are presenting things to me, I'm focused more on the assumptions behind their idea. I want them to reconsider those assumptions in ways that might lead them to rethink their hypothesis. Reconsidering assumptions and constantly evaluating those assumptions is what differentiates good and bad companies. We are often too wired to use the assumptions based on our past experience.

The goal is to fail fast, learn from it and move to the next thing. Startups and digitally native companies do this very well. Large enterprises don't. They continue to invest in initiatives that aren't doing well because they aren't comfortable with the idea of failing.

**Q. What have been the most challenging aspects of leadership for you?**

A. Early on, I worked in roles where I had direct control of the responsibilities and the outcomes. Then one of my HR leaders told me a decade ago that I'm not very good at working on sphere of influence, and leading people who do not work for me directly.

That was a huge learning curve for me. Another important lesson was to learn to have the courage to share bad news very quickly, and to be humble about your role when there is good news. When you share bad news, you want to be out front. When you share good news, you want to be behind.

**Q. What is it like to work for you day to day?**

A. I'm a bit impatient. When I give someone a problem to solve, I don't want to micromanage. I used to do that, but I can't anymore, given that I'm doing a zillion things at any given point of time.

I'm very good at zooming in and zooming out and giving people room to run, but I want some regular tidbits of data to give me comfort that progress is being made. If I have that level of comfort, then I will stop meddling.

**Q. When you're assessing talent, what are the X factors you're looking for in their skills and abilities? And what questions do you ask in job interviews?**

A. Big-idea thinking, an ability to connect the dots, and high energy. The best way to know whether someone can connect the dots is that they have a unique point of view.

The second thing I look for in a conversation is whether I have learned more from the other person than what I shared with them? And if I did learn more than what I gave them, that conversation is worthwhile.