

"A leader should keep his head in the clouds, but feet on the ground"

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Vijay K Thadani, chief executive officer of NIIT Ltd, a global talent development corporation, shares his leadership mantra with *Hindustan Times* and discusses a range of issues on leadership. Excerpts:

How do you define a leader?
A leader is an inspiring mentor whom others would want to follow.

What are the three most important traits of a leader?

Leaders should be strategic thinkers, who inspire others with their vision. They should have the courage to take bold decisions and lead from the front. They should have the confidence to

hire people better than themselves and promote risk taking.

As a leader of the NIIT group, how do you cultivate leaders?

We start by enrolling people in NIIT's vision, values and beliefs. From there, we help them build their own aspiration and career path. We give them challenging goals and encourage mistake making as long as it contributes to their learning. We engage them in cross disciplinary teams, such as in our chairman's 'Quality Club' program, we provide lateral movement opportunities and finally we have formal leadership certification programs. This creates a pipeline of high caliber leaders aligned to NIIT's vision and values, for effective organisation building.

What is the role of a professional leader in a promoter-driven company?

The terminology, promoter-driven, is more suited to the industrial age. In an organisation of the knowledge economy such as ours, 'professional founders' would be a more appropriate terminology. The role of the leader remains the same i.e. to inspire with thoughts and lead by action. The owner-employee relationship is also redundant. In fact, at NIIT, we have banned the term 'employee'. We call ourselves 'NIITians', a term which creates a common alignment of equal stakes in the emotional ownership of the organisation.

Since September 2008, the world has fallen into a maelstrom of serial crises. What is the role of a leader in these times?

Good weather never made good sailors. As an organisation with 32 years of experience, with both good and not so good times, we have seen that successful leaders in times of crisis re-emphasise the values and beliefs of the organisation. They make courageous moves because they see crisis as an opportunity for them, to learn and prove their mettle.

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What has been the biggest leadership challenge you've faced?

In the late 90's we were backing internet technologies and in 2001 the dot-com bubble burst. It was a wakeup call for revisiting our strategy set. We realised that in short-term, we would need to cut costs. The NIIT value system got exemplified with NIITians coming forward to take a voluntary pay cut rather than downsize the organisation. So, in many ways this crisis tested the tenacity of this organisation and strengthened our core belief that NIIT is about its people.

Do you think the role of business leaders has come under cloud - globally and domestically - or late?

Just as leaders get accolades when their teams and organisations do well, they also get the flak when it is otherwise. The global and Indian economy is volatile and business formulae in some of the sectors such as IT are changing. In times like this, when organisations struggle to find their S curves back, the role of a business leader does come under cloud. For great leaders, this is an opportunity.

Leaders have to often carry the cross of other's wrong doings and inefficiencies, the global banking sector today, for instance. What role can good leadership play to counter balance this image?

Being a leader is not about maintaining an image. It is about being driven by a vision, a cause. When leaders inherit a role, they have to accept all the baggage that comes with it. When they completely own the challenge, is when their turnaround success story begins.

What is your one-line leadership mantra?

Your growth is the derivative of the growth of each member of your team.

Who are the leaders that have inspired you?

I was fortunate to be born in times of great change, where I could see the contributions of many great social, literary and scientific leaders. I had the opportunity to be inspired by someone nearly every day. Even in my organisation, every now and then I discover a new trait of leadership that becomes my inspiration for the day.

Who is a leader in your industry that you respect?

Of the many that I hold in very high esteem, I have the highest respect for K. J. Somaiya, the father of the Indian software industry.

What is the biggest leadership lesson that you have learnt?

Leaders should always keep their heads in the cloud but feet firmly planted on the ground.

What is the best leadership decision you have taken?

The best decision was to maintain single identity for NIIT through our values and beliefs framework. Even when we transcended continents, products and business strategies, our values and beliefs framework is the bond that binds all NIITians together.

What is the worst leadership decision you have taken?

For the first 15 years, we thrived on innovation. However, as the scale grew, we felt the need to introduce a strong quality and process orientation. It was a very successful movement, but somewhere we lost the balance between process and innovation. In the last few years, we made course correction and introduced a series of innovative learning solutions, with NIIT Cloud Campus being the most recent.