

MindTree

## All the Presidents' Men

Subroto Bagchi

With a few exceptions, I have enjoyed working for all my bosses. The ones I did not enjoy working with were good people—but one cannot always have the chemistry such that sparks fly. My first boss was a man named Mahesh Chand Bahree—the then "Works Secretary" of DCM Cloth Mills. The Works Secretary's office handled godowns, transportation, insurance, procurement of coal, and for some strange reason, the comptist pool. There were about two dozen unionized data entry clerks whose job was to enter worksheets into comptometers — mechanical adding machines to verify the payment of incentives to workers.

The factory was DCM's parent unit, and no longer exists. It was a dirty , noisy, largely unhealthy and generally poorly run factory. Mahesh Bahree started his life as a Spinning Master with the company. Early in life, a shuttle flew into one of his eyes, rendering him blind in that eye. As a result, he was shifted to this administrative job. As a Management Trainee, I was allocated to his department. He was a big man, with a big heart. He used to call me "Sonny Boy"— partly out of fondness, and partly to let me know that in his eyes, I would remain a kid for a long time to come. It was my first big job and I did not mind his tutelage. There was nothing glamorous about the functions he led, but he always pretended that he was running a battleship and was the Commander-in-Chief.

The people in the department were mostly unionized clerks and half-naked loaders, whose job was to move bales of cloth into a godown, identify them for payment of duty and destination, and load them on to trucks to 450 places in the country. Every month, towards the last few days, the number of bales to be shipped peaked so that higher sales could be shown. Due to excise regulations, shipments had to go out within a certain time of the day. To ensure that his rag-tag army felt as if they were going to war, Mahesh Bahree would go to the loading bay, pick up a can of marking ink, and write destination markings on the bales himself. Along the way, he was always shouting out abuses, jokes, a word of cheer to his people. He spoke to them in the local dialect and would address the oldest loader—a toothless bald man whose age no one knew—as "Chacha," often teasing him about his "lugai." In all his actions, he ensured three things: the first was that he enjoyed himself. Secondly, he had the respect of his people. Finally, when the excise officials used to see him marking bales and standing next to the loading bay, they never messed with him, despite the fact that those were the days of the license Raj, and even a lowly government clerk used to behave like a revered lord.

Mahesh Bahree taught me two things: a job is never either dull or interesting. People make it dull or interesting. A job is never stupid or strategic—it is the man who is stupid or strategic.

All was going well till one day, when the textile workers went on a strike and sat around the factory gates, stopping all movement of goods. The entire production was locked in. Huge export consignments were locked in as well. Days became weeks, and weeks became months. Running out of funds, the company moved the courts to allow it to remove the finished goods and sell them in the market. The courts gave a favorable order but the police did not want to forcibly evacuate the goods, fearing a situation in which the workers got violent. They said if there was some way in which we could enter the factory unnoticed and get the shipment ready to go, they would allow us an hour to move in the trucks, load them, take them out, and give safe passage till the trucks hit the Idgah Road in Delhi—barely 500 meters from the factory gate. It was felt that striking workers, on seeing the operation, would rush to the nearby worker's colony, bring in women and children and other co-workers, and thereafter, anything could happen. The single golden hour was all that the police would give us to manage the operation. They would give no protection after that, as they did not want to risk violence.

Mahesh Bahree decided to take the chance, but he could not be seen anywhere near the factory as every picketing worker would recognize him. I suggested that I could go in. I told him that I could shave off my beard and go in there, dressed as a Security Officer in uniform. The law allowed full protection to plant security people. It was at once a daring and a juvenile plan. If the trick failed, I could get lynched, and anything could happen. Mahesh Bahree thought for a while and gave my plan the okay. The next day, dressed in khaki uniform, I entered DCM's oldest mill, heavily picketed by striking workers. As I briskly alighted from a security vehicle, pulled the beret over my sunglasses and moved in through the small opening of a padlocked gate, the strikers gave me contemptuous looks and went about their game of cards. Once inside, the entire stage was set. On cue, trucks escorted by the Police moved in and in less than an hour, the entire shipment was moved out before anyone could gather their wits.

Mahesh Bahree's greatness was in trusting a 22-year-old Management Trainee with an operation whose success was less than certain. Even today, I wonder if I can ever match his total faith in me. He taught me to take risks. To allow people the freedom to try things out without the fear of consequences.

Many years after, I came across a beautiful line from Mother Teresa. She wrote, "God does not require us to succeed. He only requires us to try."

My experience at DCM was completed through a difficult moment of truth. Once, I had a showdown with the entire system when the head of the comptist pool, one of Mr. Bahree's trusted men, locked horns with me. He had made a disparaging statement about the management, and I demanded that he be transferred within twenty-four hours. Looking back, it was an unreasonable and immature demand. I also told my boss and his boss that I would put in my papers if the stipulated disciplinary action was not taken. I waited for twenty-four hours and put in my papers because he was not transferred. At this point, the Executive Director—a respected and feared man named Mr. B.D. Pathak—called me. He heard me out as I told him how the man had offended my self-respect, and that the issue was about defiance and insubordination. He told me to sit down and then he told me a wonderful thing. He said that when a seed is trying to sprout from under a rock, the rock's presence is all-powerful. It has the power to obstruct, even to crush, the sprouting seed. But as the seed sprouts and a tiny, fragile sapling grows from under, it softly circumvents the rock above it. One day it becomes a large tree. That day, the rock remains at its feet. We have to have the tenacity of the tree. I took my resignation back and hugged the man who had offended me with his comments and defiance.

After five years at DCM, I decided to move on, and wanted to join the nascent Indian IT industry. That decision turned out to be the door to my destiny. There weren't too many companies around. Someone told me that there was a maverick company called HCL, where I could try for a job. At two-thirds the salary and a step down from my role at DCM, I joined HCL as an entry-level salesperson. There, I met a man named R.K. Gupta as my first boss. He taught me something very unusual on my very first day at work. Coming from a smokestack, feudal, textile mill to a computer company where you could call your boss's boss by the first name and bum cigarettes from him was a huge culture shock for me. Dressed up to create the right impression on the first day, I entered RK's cabin to get to know him. After the very brief niceties, he asked me to sell him a computer. I cleared my throat and gave him a very sophisticated, long-winded spiel, carefully listening to my own voice all the time to make sure I was sounding impressive enough. After a couple of minutes of hearing me out, he grimaced in pain and said in Hindi: "Yaar Subroto, kuch aisi baat bol, jisko sunke Customer kursi chhodke khada ho jayega."

Translated into English, it would mean something like, "Say something quickly enough that makes the customer jump out of his chair." This was my first lesson in selling. Cut to the chase. In the very first two minutes, say something that hooks the customer. In other words, it is not sophistication, it is empathy, and it is memorability. You have to say something that makes you memorable. Makes you interesting. Draws your customer into giving you her complete, undivided attention. People like Davenport, noted authority on Knowledge Management and author of the book "The Attention Economy" will tell you how short people's attention spans are. If you do not get their attention, you do not get their mindshare. The time you always have is just two minutes. Every dealmaker has to remember that the first two minutes invariably decide whether or not you will get the next two hours.

I followed RK to the next company, a fledgling computer company called PSI that was always strapped for cash. We worked together and I learnt many things from him. When the imprest money would arrive at the Delhi branch Office, there were always the bills to be paid, the travel accounts to be settled, the salaries to be given out. All of these used to be in backlogs for months. RK had a simple rule. The secretary was paid first, the salesman's travel bills were settled next, the junior-most engineer was given an advance against his unpaid salary, then I was paid some money and what was often left as a pittance was all he would take home. The routine remained constant for the three years we worked together in PSI. RK never complained, often running into his fourth or fifth month of going without his own salary. RK also taught me complete transparency with customers. He never bluffed his customer—he was always ready to break the bad news first. As a result, his customers always loved him even when the company could not deliver. Working at PSI was not easy. After month upon month with a cash crunch, I finally decided to move out and eventually ended up starting a company called Project 21. The company did well but could not get financing from banks at that time and after three years of hand-to-mouth existence, I decided to return to the industry. This time, I joined Wipro.

There, my most memorable manager was a man called Dr. Sridhar Mitta. Dr. Mitta was the first man Azim Premji had hired when he and his Finance Chief Ashok Narasimhan had decided to move into the computer business. Dr. Mitta was working with ECIL after obtaining his PhD from the US. He was brought in to start Wipro's R&D. I learnt how to manage nerds from Dr. Mitta. Wipro, in the nineties, was highly respected for its indigenous R&D that designed hardware, ported Operating Systems and implemented network protocols. The R&D consisted of 80 nerds who were a life form unto themselves.

They were highly competent, idiosyncratic people with contempt for lower forms of intelligence in general and business folks in particular. I was the latter variety brought in to help transform the inward-looking, domestically-focused, cost center into an international "lab-on-hire". Dr. Mitta was my boss. From him I learnt that the first step towards managing the so-called "difficult people" is listening to them. This may not sound like a big deal. It becomes a big deal because often, bosses do not know how to listen to people by first suspending all pre-conceived notions, biases and judgment. The smallest nerd could walk in, pull up a chair in front of Dr. Mitta and tell him the most absurd technical idea or a strange personal issue. Dr. Mitta would first listen intently and completely, and then say his piece. Sometimes, the nerds would come out with very bizarre ideas or worse, do something bizarre. The range of such things is very wide—from putting the wrong end of the connector into the socket, to driving into stationary objects in the middle of a deserted road, to mixing up the flight number on the ticket jacket with the gate number from where an international flight was to take off. From Dr. Mitta, I learnt that every nerd was entitled to such two bizarre acts every year. The key was not to react to it, but instead, actually to enjoy it. In fact, once an operating manager could begin to accept and even celebrate such things, he could even keep count of unused entitlements and maintain a carry-forward log. If you knew that, managing the R&D types wasn't a big deal.

I also learnt from Dr. Mitta the meaning of humility. As Chief Technology Officer of the corporation, he was the epitome of accessibility and complete egolessness. He taught me that knowledge and arrogance are antithetical. The littlest man on the street could walk up to him and ask the stupidest question, and Dr. Mitta would respond by going to the whiteboard on which the most complex issue would soon be reduced to a set of three block diagrams in which "open systems" would solve all of life's problems. His appearance was, and remains, so non-descript that you have to pinch yourself to believe that this is the man who laid the foundation for a vegetable oil company to venture into building complex computing systems.

When I returned to India, my challenge was to make Wipro's R&D get a better look and feel compared to its past. In all those years, as a frugal corporation, the place had a lower-middle class, poor-Brahmin feel. As I went around my job, managers from other divisions developed the feeling that I was not cost-conscious, and this was reflected in my 360-degree feedback. I was very upset and went to see Dr. Mitta about it. In his characteristic style, he heard me out. Then he told me that we live in a world in which perception is the reality. And, he told me that it takes time for perception to get built up. So the solution was to go back and do my work, but to beware of my actions and utterances. So I went back and did all of that, taking absolute care. The next year, the same feedback repeated itself from some of the same peers. This time I was devastated. I went back to Dr. Mitta and expressed my frustrations. He listened to me patiently and then told me, "While it takes time to build perceptions, it takes even longer for perceptions to change." I was dumbfounded by the Zen-like statement.

Realizing how much truth was in it, I just went back to my desk and focused on doing the things correctly. In doing our work, we need to be sensitive to feedback and work to correct ourselves but we should not expect drastic changes in what people think of us. We should not lose spirit because of obstinate public opinion. Some of it has a basis in truth, and we must have the humility to accept it. Under Dr. Mitta's sagely guidance, I flourished. I rose to become the first Chief Executive of Wipro's Global R&D. Over a period of five years, the transformation was so complete, it was amazing. It had to do largely with the intrinsic quality of the people who constituted the R&D. From an inward-looking cost-center, it became a solidly profitable lab-on-hire in the corporation. The nerds had become business people. In all this, I realized that I was beginning to feel restless—I was ready to do something larger. Dr. Mitta and Ashok Soota, who at that time was the Vice Chairman of the IT Group, asked me to articulate what I wanted to do. I remember telling them to identify an area or thing that kept Mr. Premji or Ashok awake at night. I wanted to work on that one thing. I was ready for a Mission.

In December of 1996, the call came from Mr. Premji's office. He wanted a line manager to come and set up a corporate Quality initiative that would bind all of Wipro's five disparate businesses and make Wipro world-class. I moved on from being the Chief Executive of Global R&D to set up Mission: Quality as part of Mr. Premji's Office. In the process, I came to work for and closely observe one of corporate India's most celebrated men.

My first lesson from Mr. Premji took place even before that. It was in 1988. I had just joined Wipro. One day, he walked in to my half-cabin and started reviewing my work. He had obviously come with an agenda. The debtor situation had gone out of hand and he needed it to be cleaned up. He wanted me to handle the task. I told him that my hands were already full. He asked me to tell how I spent my time. I told him that I was spending 40% of my time on sales coordination, and 40% on customer relations, and that 20% of my time was going into training. He calmly replied, "Continue to give 40% to sales coordination, 40% to customer relations, and 20% to training, and give 20% to debtor management." I was puzzled with the maths. I told him, "Mr. Premji, that does not add up." He said, "No, it does. When leaders are loaded 120%, they are stretched. When they are stretched, they deliver their best".

I took the additional 20% and delivered one of my most remembered assignments in Wipro. Now I was going to work directly with the man.

While I joined Mr. Premji's Office as Corporate Vice President, Mission: Quality, and started getting used to seeing him frequently, I took time to drop my awe of him as the Chairman of Wipro. Later I realized that managers who are required to work for very senior people cannot be in awe of their bosses if they want to be effective. However much Mr. Premji tried to bridge the gap and treat me as an equal, it was a while before I was myself in his presence. Early on in our interaction, we started off on the wrong foot with each other. Looking back, it was my immaturity that was the problem. The backdrop of it was like this. I had no previous experience of handling Quality. When I asked Mr. Premji, "Why me?", he had replied that he wanted a line manager to handle the assignment, and not a Quality expert. He said he wanted someone with a "sense of history."

For jobs that need large-scale change-management, you need people not just competent in what they are supposed to do, but people who have a sense of history. They understand the existential issues, the challenges, the larger purpose—this, as a key job requirement is seldom understood by people who staff up assignments needing large-scale change management. "Sense of history"— such a beautiful, powerful, uplifting thought!

That uplifting thought apart, I had to produce a roadmap within days of taking charge. I was lost at sea because I needed to understand what the concept of Quality was all about before drawing up a roadmap. Every week, Mr. Premji started calling me and asking me for the roadmap. Each time, I would repeat the same story—that I would like to understand from other companies how they have done it, read books, meet consultants in the field, get a feel and then come out with a roadmap. I could not predict how much time all that would take, and he could not wait. When Mr. Premji pushed me too hard, I lost my cool one day, and told him that he could either wait for me to create the roadmap or, if he knew it himself, to give it to me, so that I could run with one. I was pleased with myself with that piece of bravery. He remained unruffled and said, "My job is to push you till you find your own limit. When you do, you have to push back."

The role of leadership is to create the stretch and push people to find their own limits.

From Mr. Premji, I learnt the power of simplicity and forthrightness. His simplicity comes out in the way he writes, the way he speaks and dresses, the food he eats and the way he addresses issues. You do not ever have to wonder what he has on his mind. He speaks his mind without any fuzz factor. Adopting simplicity in thinking, communication and strategy is often the most difficult task. Sometimes, managers think that something overtly simple is not impressive. The more we dress up our thoughts and behavior, the more we become difficult for people to understand. The less the understanding, the higher the inability to follow a leader. Mr. Premji has a great sense of humor. This is a very important quality in a leader. Once, when I was driving him to a meeting in California, he had been bugging me about some issue and had me miffed.

While we were driving on Highway 101, my car made a rumbling sound over a particular patch. I was familiar with the road and knew that it was normal. Responding to the sudden rumbling, Mr. Premji asked me, "Subroto, do you have a flat?" I quipped, "No, I live in an apartment."

He ignored the statement. Having acted smart with him, I promptly lost my way and somehow managed to get him on time for a crucial meeting at the Sun campus—I was overcome with embarrassment. He said nothing. After the meeting we drove to another meeting at Tandem Computers.

When he arrived there, the President at Tandem went on and on about the great vision with which Mr. Premji was building Wipro. Mr. Premji listened for a while and then observed, "Yes, we have great vision, but sometimes lose our way." I looked the other way.

The greatness of leadership is in surrounding oneself with a top performing team. The better the team, the higher becomes the idiosyncrasy of the people in it. Among the top management of Wipro was a leader whose pastime was to openly, often virulently, criticize Mr. Premji. He did that both in front of him and behind his back. Sometimes this got out of hand, but Mr. Premji used to be unruffled about it. The simple reason was that the leader consistently delivered what he committed to. One day, I was quite amazed with the man and asked Mr. Premji why he had to put up with such behavior. Mr. Premji told me that leaders must be comfortable with idiosyncratic people. Many high performers have their own quirks. Our job is to focus on what they deliver, not what their quirks are.

Competence to do the job has to be far ahead of personal reverence.

From him, I also learnt about how business can be conducted with the highest standards of integrity. When the average Wipro person goes home at night, he sleeps well because the system does not expect him to do anything unethical to source or execute business. In fact, he can walk out of a deal if it is contingent upon such behavior. To Mr. Premji, black is black and white is white. He does not go into grey because he says that there are many shades of grey.

My final lesson from him was on my last day at Wipro. He wanted me to remain at the company. I told him, "But Mr. Premji, we are very different people, we think very differently." He replied, "That is the reason we should work together."

When we look for people around us, we invariably look for sameness. It is so much more comfortable for us. But progress requires intelligent friction: constructive opposition, points and healthy counterpoints. The job of leaders is to build high personal comfort with contrarians who think differently, create alternative points of view, and have the power to question the state of things. In my ten years at Wipro, I had never had the opportunity to work for Ashok Soota. Anyone who has worked with Ashok will tell you that it is one of life's gifts to have him as your boss. When the time did come for me to get to work for him, he sent me off to work for Mr. Premji instead. The golden opportunity came when we co-founded MindTree and through it, I finally came to report into Ashok Soota. The relationship between Ashok and the people who have worked for him is difficult to describe. In business, you come across leaders who are more left-brained or more right-brained. Ashok is the most balanced I have come across between the two—he represents the balance between process and empathy. While data speaks to him, he also listens to empathy.

My interactions with Ashok have taken place through nearly two decades. Of this, he has written my appraisal for the last six years at MindTree. I have learnt countless lessons from him in these years, the first of which is about candor.

When I came back to India in 1993, after a very successful stint in the US, lots of things had changed. The market had opened up and everyday a new multi-national was opening shop. At that time, I was blown away by a job offer from an aircraft engine company that offered me 9 times the money Wipro was paying me. I told myself that the money would be enough for me to retire at 40 — a stupid goal everyone sets when he is all of 36. So, I told Dr. Mitta that I was going. He was sad about this, and later, he asked me to see Ashok for breakfast the next morning.

I went to see Ashok. I had a well-rehearsed set of answers to every which question he could ask. I also felt like a conqueror who would be remembered for long but wore a graceful politeness on my face. I waited for Ashok in his drawing room thinking of how he would open the conversation, how he would want to retain me at any cost. How he would sweet-talk me because, I was, after all, a high performer. Ashok walked in, shook hands with me and as we sat down, told me in a very matter of fact tone that I was getting enticed by a "stupid job".

My jaws fell. Here I was—the prima donna with a potential salary cheque higher than his—and the man does not sweet-talk me into staying. He says I have landed a stupid job! Er, is he implying that I am stupid enough to have landed a stupid job? If Ashok was saying that, it had to have some truth in it! I realized that I was making a mistake. I was trying to be someone I was not cut out to be. I was an IT industry person who made a living by selling software — the world of aircraft engines involved dynamics that I had no clue about. Eventually, after some more reflection, I remained at Wipro.

Leadership is about personal character. All too often, I see leaders pussyfoot on issues, seek compromises that are unnecessary and say things they do not mean. A man like Ashok needs to cultivate no followers. They will simply go with him because they know that the man demonstrates character. The man is real.

Ashok Soota is an interesting leader from many different standpoints. A Mechanical Engineer from Roorkee, he started his life at Burma Shell in the sixties and quickly moved from there to become a Senior Management Trainee at DCM. From there he went to do his MBA at the Asian Institute of Management at Manila and after coming back to the Shriram Group, moved on to take over as President of Wipro's IT business when it was all of \$2 million in size. He grew that to a \$500 million business before co-founding MindTree with nine others. Ashok is a case study of a leader who never chose his team. At Shriram, he inherited the business and its structure. At Wipro, he inherited a top team, which was already in place. At MindTree, out of the ten of us, he was the ninth co-founder and by the time he came on board, we had progressed on many key issues. Out of the eight co-founders already on-board, Ashok did not know four of them at all. His personal conviction has been that there are only "A" type leaders or "B" type leaders — there are no "A" teams and "B" teams. I remember clearly an occasion on which he was being feted for some personal award he had received. He went to deliver his acceptance of the award by saying that he thought his team was a "national resource". He always places high expectations on his team and minces no words in calling a spade a spade but try ever telling him that his people are average — you will have earned a permanent enemy. As a result, Ashok has always delivered extraordinary results with ordinary people.

From Ashok I learnt to value diversity, and I learnt to prize people for what they can do, not what they have done. Ashok taught all of us complete egolessness. When we started MindTree, Ashok was already a national-level celebrity. People thought he would be a high-maintenance person in a start-up. To the contrary, even today, Ashok carries his own bag while traveling, and heats and eats his own food while staying in a \$50 a day hotel overseas. Nobody stands up when he enters a room and people call him by his first name. The smallest person can get a reply to an email to him within twenty-four hours and he reads it with the same attention that he gives to a mail from a CIO of a Fortune 500 client.

Ashok is the fairest man when it comes to dealings internally and externally. No one I have met has ever felt that he did an unfair deal if Ashok Soota was on the negotiating table.

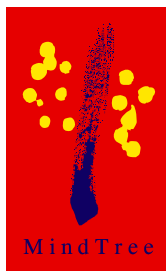
Ashok taught me to look at data whenever emotions run high. Sometimes in points of crisis, managers psych themselves into believing that the end is near. They will come and tell you why a decision has to be taken only their way. "If we do not release this ad today, we will lose to the competition", "If we do not do a salary revision now, we will not get anybody to join us", "If we do not agree to his terms, he will take us to court." You could never get Ashok to rush into a decision by saying any of these things.

From him I learnt not to make a decision if you sense that you are being put under any undue pressure. Let the pressure move on and then take the decision in a fair state of mind. Nothing bad happens because you have to weigh the pros and cons your way and would rather have some more time. Insist on that extra time. That way, you take very few regrettable decisions. There is an inherent risk in taking the time, but it is our job to take that amount of risk.

While Ashok epitomizes the rational, he is at the same time, a deeply intuitive person. He uses the power of intuition to look for opportunities, create alliances and sometimes, to gauge an adversary's moves. But he would never use his intuition without putting it to the touchstone test with data, and whenever he is surrounded with data, he questions it from his intuition.

Adversity is another area in which I learnt something very important from Ashok. I saw him, on three different occasions, coping with powerful opponents who had the capability to create significant damage. The first time was at Wipro where one was still a part of a sizable entity. The other two times were at MindTree. In each instance, we were threatened with legal recourse. Ashok was fighting on principles. He did not care a hoot about the size of the adversary and the potential negative fall-out for his organization. He taught me that in a battle of principles, it is not the size of the adversary that matters. It is the size of the principle that matters.

In the last 30 years of my work-life, I have come across many people who have left a lasting impression on me and have impacted my work as well as philosophy of life. Sometimes I wonder where I would be today, had it not been for the collective learning I got from all of the people I've worked for. I would certainly have been a different person today! Since I cannot think of myself being someone else, I must express my gratitude to these outstanding people through whom life has presented itself to me. I also hope that they enjoyed me as much as I enjoyed serving them.



Subroto Bagchi is co-founder and chief operating officer of MindTree Ltd. Many of his other writing can be archived at [www. Mindtree.com/subrotobagchi](http://www.Mindtree.com/subrotobagchi)

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