

MindTree

# Leadership Challenges in the 21st Century

Subroto Bagchi's address at the  
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Dear Friends,

It is an honor to be with all of you here on the occasion of the 750th meet of the Garden City Speakers Forum (GCSF), India's first Toastmasters Club. Toastmasters International (TMI), as a 100% non-profit and voluntary organization, is devoted to making effective oral communication a worldwide reality. It is indeed delivering yeoman service to our society at large. I express my appreciation and gratitude for your selfless service and wish you all great success in the years ahead. When I was invited to deliver this talk, I readily agreed because I have seen my own organization, MindTree Consulting, benefiting from your movement. One of the major issues Indian technologists constantly deal with is the inability to communicate effectively in a rapidly global, increasingly multi-cultural environment. So, thank you for helping us to speak up.

This evening, you have chosen for me the topic, "Leadership Challenges in the 21st Century." On the one hand, the subject is close to my heart. On the other hand, speaking on a subject like this is risky business because no one really knows anything about such a topic. It is for the simple reason that the 21st century will span one hundred years, and being born in 1957, I will at best be able to see only a third of the 21st century. So, who knows? It is not just a matter of put-on humility that makes me say this.

Let's all play a small game. Let us imagine that I was born in 1857 instead of 1957. And let us imagine that the current year is 1906 and not 2006. And now just for a while, imagine that you have invited me to speak on Leadership Challenges in the 20th century. What do you think would be my time horizon and what would I tell you about unfolding events, socio-economic-political-scientific changes and their attendant leadership challenges? For that, we need to ask ourselves what made news in the year 1906. Let us do some time travelling.

It was the year of a devastating earthquake in San Francisco in which 3000 people died. A tsunami hit Hong Kong and killed 10000. It was also the year in which the San Francisco School Board decided that Japanese children had to study in *racially segregated* schools. A Frenchman named Albert Santos-Dumont made news by flying a plane for *200 feet*. Explosion in a French *colliery* killed 1060 miners. President Theodore Roosevelt became the first sitting US President to *travel outside* the United States. 1906 was also the year in which Reginald Fessenden made the world's first radio broadcast. Immunization for the Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) was first developed in 1906. It was also the first time that someone advocated the theory that the core of the Earth is molten. If you were a woman, only in Ireland could you cast a vote.

That was the 20th century when it was a six-year old. As you look at the young child, I want you to move forward in time and remind you that in 1906, the following things have not taken place yet:

- The first world war has not happened, hence the second is also in time's womb
- Television does not exist
- The Ford Assembly line is not born — this means, the global manufacturing economy has not yet arrived
- In the United States, blacks are still niggers. In Africa, apartheid is at its height. In India a child born to a *shudra* dutifully accepts the work ordained to his caste
- The world does not know about computers, penicillin, antibiotic drugs and contraception
- The atom bomb has not happened
- Peter Drucker has not told the world that people, and not capital, are the most important resource of any enterprise
- Sputnik is in the womb of time, making Marshall McLuhan's coinage "the Global Village" a good 51 years away
- The Japanese are a rice-growing nation of illiterate farmers and feuding Shoguns
- The cold war has not happened
- Communism is not widespread, the USSR is not born and has not broken up
- AIDS is unknown
- There is no movement on global trade
- 9/11 has not happened
- India is just another British dominion

Now you tell me, if I were to stand in front you, with this microphone that does exist — having been created in 1877 — how could I have been able to imagine that these things could or would happen? How would I have been qualified to tell you about the attendant leadership challenges of the 20th century? Neither could have anyone else.

Now imagine my predicament today. Six years into the 21st century, you have asked me to stand in front of you to tell you what leadership challenges are ahead of all of us in the next 94 years! I have no clue of the tectonic shifts, the discontinuous forces of systemic change and of powerful emergence — how could I talk of what leadership will be needed and for what? What will be the

challenges before the leaders who must steer the course? Yet, you have called me here and I have immodestly accepted the invitation — hence, I must speak on the subject. So, I shall.

It is true that we do not quite know what kind of world we will inhabit in the century ahead, its complexities and opportunities. Leaders deal with only those two things: complexities and opportunities.

All we know is that we will need leadership, and our leaders will have to steer us away from those complexities and steer us towards opportunities that will ensure the continuation of the human race. In the looming specter of the unknown, the good news however, is that a few things do not really change. They are unlikely to change as has been the lesson from the history of the human race, which is 4 million years old as we stand here today. Let us look at some of those issues that endure time. Let us start with the question, "who is a leader?"

Joel Barker, a futurologist gives us a simple, yet profound definition of the term "leader." He says that a leader is a person whom others "opt" to follow, to go someplace they would not go by themselves. That "someplace" is, of course, is a place in the future. The definition implies that a leader is a person who does not *command* followership. Almost invariably, others "opt to follow" the leader. The leader takes them to someplace — a freer state, a healthier life, a happier economic state or even a more difficult one by the power of his vision.

The essence of leadership is in creating a powerful vision of a future that does not exist yet, enlisting the support of people and carrying them across a chasm that separates the current state from the desired state. For instance, Indians did not have the vision of freedom. By ourselves, we would not have gone to a freer state. It took a leader like Gandhi to take us to that some place else. The same is the case of Moses, of William Wallace, of Abraham Lincoln and of Nelson Mandela.

Taking an example from the world of business, when Jack Welch took over the reins at General Electric, it was a decaying corporation with a dispirited army of disgruntled blue-collar workers. Jack Welch created the vision of a global organization and took these men and women across to become the most formidable American company of the last century. The definition of a leader, the requirement of creating a vision and rallying people around that vision and accomplishing it, are not going to change in the 21st century.

What will change, though, are the following: Leaders cannot any longer have a vision that is local, exclusive and narrow. In a global world, only a larger, more beneficial and more inclusive vision will hold good in order that it becomes sustainable. So, whether we are looking at issues like food, shelter, well being, security or our environment, the 21st century leader will have to have a larger perspective beyond just thinking of my enterprise, my state or my country.

The world will be united in its pain, hence a pain in a distant African hamlet will haunt the most affluent national capital. We will not be able to be selectively isolated.

In many ways, the visible gap that will separate the 21st century from the 20th, will be on an order of magnitude larger than that between the 20th century and its predecessor.

Yet, one thing will remain the same — it is the role of the leader in establishing a new order of things through values that people must subscribe to, in order that they collectively reach the common goal. Any discussion on the subject of values is bound to be met with skepticism in today's times.

People like to think that value-leadership is an oxymoron. I am currently reading a book on Gandhi by Louis Fischer. In it, there is a quote from Albert Einstein who bemoaned, "In our time of utter moral decadence he was the only statesman to stand for a higher human relationship in the political sphere." Going many thousands of years back from then, even back to Plato's time, the Master worried about the declining morality of the society and was quite appalled at the "disobedience" shown by children. The Mahabharata, written many centuries before Christ, is full of stories of decadence, lust, intrigue and immoral behavior by rulers themselves.

So, the fear that we are living in times that are beyond redemption is not well-founded in history. In some sense, nothing really changes. We are in no deeper conflict and no more morally worse off than we were a thousand years ago. The greater the conflict, higher becomes the need to establish values in society. The higher the perceived value-conflict, the greater is the need for a leader, and the likelihood that a leader will emerge. Krishna's message "*yada yada hi dharmashya glanir bhavati Bharata...*", is less a religious and more a leadership statement of an inevitable reality.

In that backdrop, I can say with reasonable confidence that in the 21st century, there will be greater demand for value articulation and value constancy. The greater the rate of change around us, the higher is the need for values because every change is potentially destructive.

Peter Drucker once said that it is values that help us in times of great change. In fact, only when we keep values as a constant are we able to change everything else around them. He takes a leaf from Mother Nature's book to explain the phenomenon. Nature found out early on that all moving things had to be symmetric at the poles. Once it found the concept of polar symmetry, it kept that as constant and created a two-legged man, all of the four-legged animals and even the centipede on that basis. Similarly, nature found out the optimum number of times a heart must beat — 40 million times or so — and she kept that as a constant in all animals from a salamander frog to a human being. Thus, the question becomes, in creating organizations and institutions — what is the equivalent of polar symmetry and what is the heart beat that must be kept constant? The polar symmetry and the heart beat are about values. The task of helping people to choose a set of values, and to articulate them, and then helping in the internalization process is a fundamental leadership requirement — and that is not going to change.

What will change, however, are two things: increasingly, people will resist values that are simply handed down to them as they would like to be involved in the value creation process itself. Two, leadership accountability for holding up the chosen values will be significantly higher because the digitally connected world with thousands of satellites as witnesses will make everyone as visible as an ant in the eye of a geostationary satellite today. From Google Earth, we will move towards Google Me.

In an increasingly connected and constantly communicating world, leaders will not be able to hide under the cloak of misinformation and disinformation or non-information. People may choose whether or not to act on a piece of information, but they will no longer put up with informational drought of any kind. That has changed forever.

The right to information will precede all other birthrights of man. I am free only when I have information.

Shifting from the value imperative, I want to talk about two other critical aspects of leadership. In the century ahead, leaders will need to deal with two things much more than they ever had to contend with. These are dealing with volume and dealing with complexity.

We have to work across more time zones, deal with a greater number of customers; we must socialize our intent with more nationalities and deal with many new cultural nuances. All these will increase the volumes of transactions.

While every leader will have to increase personal comfort in dealing with volume, she will also need to learn to deal with complexity. Sometimes, complexity will mean dealing with unscripted events that have a massively disruptive impact on the way things are. Consider 9/11.

Waking up on the morning of September 11, 2001, Mayor Rudy Giuliani could not have imagined how the world would permanently change within hours, and what a central role he would have to play. It entailed a task for which no professional qualification or past experience could have prepared him. Yet he had to do what he had to do. Such events leave you no time to think, plan, strategize. No time to examine alternatives, no time to brood, no time to ruminate. Only time to act.

More than ever before, in the 21st century, every leader in every field must be ready to embrace the unknown that may sometimes simply fast forward us in time, with no advance notice and no ammunition or defence. Someone put it very aptly: "We live in times in which there is a high probability of a low-probability thing happening."

During times of great upheaval, the role of the leader is not just to take charge and not just to provide directions, encouragement, solace and condolences, while standing in the middle of Ground Zero; the larger leadership imperative becomes to help people to "make sense" of what is going on. This can sometimes be more critical than providing people with the marching orders or actually solving their life's problems.

Consider this. A bomb explodes in a crowded railway station. You see your loved one die mangled in blood and gore. You begin to come to terms with the reality that if a terrorist wants to get at you, no sovereign can actually save you. You begin to question the relevance of the government.

You trust business leaders who exhorted you to work hard and give your best to your company. While you were sleeping, they run away with your pension fund money.

You seek solace from God in all this only to find the orthodox Church and the Hindu holy man in the throes of sexual ignominy. You no longer count your blessings.

You see governments, big business, organized religion and personal role models fail in front of your own eyes. In times like this, you do not really need material help. You need someone to simply make sense of what is going on around you. You need a leader who helps you to put the pieces together so that you can move on with your life. More than ever before, the task of the twenty-first century leader is to help in the "sense-making" process. Not as a post-mortem of things. The need for sense-making is real time, it must happen as things are unfolding around you.

In such times of difficulty and pain, it becomes important for leaders to be utterly simple. Simplicity is at the core of any sense-making. Unless we are able to express ourselves in the simplest of terms, people cannot lend their attention to us. When they cannot lend their attention, they cannot comprehend what we are saying. If they cannot comprehend us, they cannot align themselves and follow. This simple realization does not dawn on most leaders who seek sophistication ahead of simplicity.

That sense-making capability in a leader can be cultivated only with a deep sense of inclusion. Leaders who do not experientially feel the pain will not be able to heal others. The 20th century materialism and nexus between politics and business has numbed basic sensibilities to the extent that many of today's leaders have lost the ability to feel pain. The concept of the servant-leader is going to come back full-circle in the 21st century because only the servant-leader can feel someone else's pain. It is elemental to Gandhian leadership, which propounded that only a man who is bathed in humility and dressed in service can feel others' pains. *Vashnava janato tene kahiye jo peed parai janere*. The 21st century leader must be able not only to feel the pain of people around him, and the people in immediate vicinity and sphere of influence, but also that of all those who are twice removed from it, those who stay in the silent anonymity of their penumbra, outside the sphere of their conventional reach. That is true in politics, and business, and in non-governmental organizations.

When a leader is able to serve a customer's customer and a supplier's supplier, a student's student and a follower's follower, it is only then that abiding, unusual value will get created. The job of a leader is to create abiding, unusual value for people twice removed.

The ability of a leader to create unusual new value depends on two things: thought leadership and innovation. Thought leadership cannot come to people who have a problem-solving mindset. The temptation to be a problem-solving leader is immense as it provides him the reason to stay busy and seem busy, thereby justifying the need to perpetuate himself. Peter Drucker says that most problems cannot be solved. You can only stay ahead of them. It has never been truer than in the present times and I believe it will be even more relevant in the future.

If people could solve problems, why has the world been divided for more than fifty years over a small patch of land called Israel, no larger than 27,848 square kilometers in the middle of a desert – a land that is 7 times smaller than the state of Karnataka and much less endowed by Mother Nature?

Why are we still unable to provide safe drinking water to two-thirds of the world's population? Why is there war and disease and petty crime? Why do we deal with bribery and prostitution? Mankind had awareness of these problems, sagely wisdom, great leadership and all the resources to solve them but even today, we look lost in front of such problems that have been with us for as long as we can remember.

Closer home, look at the state of our civic infrastructure. We cannot solve the problems of our modern day cities anymore than one can put lipstick on a pig to make it look beautiful. The Chinese have understood it right. Instead of repairing crumbling edifices, they are building brand new cities. What India needs is city-building, not city-repair.

It would be immensely more cost-effective and politically convenient to build twenty more brand new cities than to fix half a dozen unwilling habitats overridden by millions of people who are either self-centered or disinterested or both. But it would require leaders who have an enormously long view of time and the power of innovation to create a vision that is beyond just solving problems. On that note, let us talk about leadership and the need for innovation.

The power of innovation is directly linked to the existence of problems. Look at the way two leaders have led with innovation to create opportunities for millions of people when everyone else saw in them just millions of problems. One man's name is Dr. Devi Shetty and the other man is Muhammad Yunus. Both have established the paradigm that it makes sense to do business with the poor. Dr. Devi Shetty's pioneering Narayana Hrudayala in Bangalore is able to profitably deliver free cardiac surgery to the peasants of Karnataka through an insurance scheme for which all they have to pay is Rs. 5 a month as premium. Muhammad Yunus' micro-credit movement covers thousands of rural women with no assets and no collaterals – they are given unsecured loans but have a repayment track record of 98%. These men have proven that if you can sell to the poor, indeed you can create huge wealth.

Leaders like Dr. Devi Shetty and Muhammad Yunus have engaged to the hilt with the power of alliances and volunteerism. These will be critical ingredients of success in the 21st century. The ability to create alliances is going to be essential as problems will be inherently complex,

intrinsically multi-dimensional. No single force will be able to pit against issues of hunger, disease, isolation and structural decadence. As forces of politics and art, of business and technology, and of religion and scientific quest come together, leaders will need to understand the power of persuasion, of dialogue, of consensus building and above all, the power to influence people whom you do not own.

That one takes us to the issue of dealing with diversity — the 21st century leader will have to be comfortable in dealing with diversity. Such a person will not seek comfort in sameness, but will celebrate differences and see the concomitant tension as an avenue for pursuing a higher order of things.

More in the past than we will see in the future, the leader was a person with super-heroic capability. The leader's effectiveness was embedded in one body. Into the future, the brand of leadership that will be celebrated will have less to do with leadership, and more to do with building leadership capacity. The 21st century will be a time for unusual leverage by building capacity outside of one great individual.

Throughout the course of human history, across civilizations and continents, the problem with leadership has been its constant battle with populism. While leaders are people others "opt to follow" and popular acceptance is basic to leadership, history is replete with examples of leaders going against the popular grain in order to establish a greater vision. Leadership is not just about populism; in its greater import, it is about effectiveness.

Finally, in the pursuit of their journey, at the very end, many great leaders have often had to pay deeply personal prices, including the price of their own lives. Lord Rama had to be separated from his wife because a lowly washerman questioned the propriety of her relationship. Jesus Christ was crucified till he bled to death. Moses was ridiculed and abused and attacked by his own followers who had crossed the desert to reach the Promised Land. Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi — all fell to assassin's bullets. For all these men, life remained a path of thorns. That equation is unlikely to change as we brace the challenges of the next nine decades that stand between us and the century ahead.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is time to close. Before I do so, it is in order to remind ourselves that I stand in front of you on a day in the year 2006. In the next 94 years, what events will unfold? How will the world fundamentally change? What crises and opportunities will man and nature create? I stand in humble ignorance of what lies ahead and hence, cannot with certainty tell you what brand of leadership will take us across the chasm.

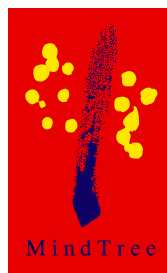
Yet all I can tell you is that many men and women who led us through the turbulence of the last century and deeply impacted our thinking were already born during or before the first ten years. Consider a handful here:

In 1906, Winston Churchill was a 32-year-old young man, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was just another 37-year-old lawyer in South Africa, Hitler was a 17-year-old boy, Mao Tse Tung was just about 13 and John Oppenheimer — the man who program-managed the "Manhattan Project" that led to the creation of the Atom Bomb — was a 2-year-old toddler.

The next two decades saw the arrival of Mother Teresa, Peter Drucker, Jonas Edward Salk, whom you need to thank for the polio drops your baby had, Arthur C Clarke who first presented the idea of the satellite, Nelson Mandela, Pope John Paul II and finally, Martin Luther King. So, someone somewhere is already born who will help us to get there, who will redefine the meaning of leadership in the 21st century.

On that note of great hope, ladies and gentleman, allow me to say good-bye for now.

I wish the people of the Garden City Speakers Forum & the Toastmasters Club all the very best. Please continue to help us express ourselves so that we lead with wisdom, courage and engagement.



Subroto Bagchi is co-founder and Chief Operating Officer at MindTree Ltd.  
His work is archived at [www.mindtree.com/subrotobagchi](http://www.mindtree.com/subrotobagchi)

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