



Leadership Edge

## Choose Adaptability to Remain Relevant in a Changing World

### Aditya Ghosh

Co-founder, Akasa Air;  
Founder, Homage Advisers;  
Board Member, OYO and  
FabIndia; Chairperson,  
SEWA - Central

*The past two years have forced and enabled glocal businesses, leaders, and professionals to pivot in ways previously thought impossible. From how we communicated, collaborated, and led our teams to what we thought of the nature of work itself—everything adapted to our dynamic and changed needs. Read what Aditya Ghosh says about turning transitions and challenges into opportunities to adapt and excel.*

Unprecedented is a much-abused term, but the pandemic and what it meant for the world has truly been an unprecedented crisis. More so because the entire world has never experienced something so secularly since the last Ice Age. There have been natural calamities, climatic crises, military campaigns, and large wars, but they have not impacted every nation and community as uniformly as COVID-19. It has forced us to address questions that hitherto remained unanswered, about what is really important to us—at work, in life, and as a species, and how we deal with changes in any of these aspects. Questions about progress and development naturally took a back seat when survivability itself was a challenge.

At the same time, when we think about change, the very first thing to understand and acknowledge is that change is inevitable, and yet, very hard. When we recognise that change will be uncomfortable, nay, painful, we make it easier to deal with the deep emotions it evokes.

This brings us to the second aspect of embracing change, where we can begin posing questions like:

**What are we going to change? In other words, what are we going to discard? And what are we going to hold on to? What values are going to remain consistent, and what are we going to let go of, as we embrace change?**



Will the proposed change bring about a tremendous amount of efficiency or growth, without walking away from what is fundamental to the business? Because if it is not going to lead to a massive spurt in efficiency, or if it is not going to make your business that much bigger, or help it grow that much faster, then there is no need to fix something that is not broken.

This approach becomes especially important for businesses—enabling us to check in with our values as we consider making changes.

## **The Culture of Change**

I see the culture of an organisation as a collection of acceptable behaviours—our way of working together and dealing with each other. Therefore, it is important to create and nurture a culture of change. I do believe that ‘respect’ should be one of the key cultural attributes of any organisation. Respect, not only for our colleagues, but also for their ideas and diversity of thought.

When respect is combined with a deep sense of humility, this gives you the ability to see change and be able to embrace it. The speed of adaptability to any change, therefore, can be a deeply cultural attribute.

An expression of this combination of respect and humility is also to look around us and be inspired by other organisations that may be doing something better than us. Many years ago, we created an ability for frontline employees to do something for a consumer or customer without having to ask for permission from their managers and above—in the best interests of the consumer. I saw a version of this practice at the Oberoi group of hotels and incorporated it at IndiGo. Similarly, many years ago, my first flight was one that I took on Air Sahara from Delhi to Chennai. At the airport, I was confused and lost, and was helped by a lady from the Jet Airways staff and not the airline I had booked with. I still remember this experience and tried to bring this at IndiGo under a service module called “service from the heart”. And I think that module is still in practice there.

While there are examples of organisational culture staying constant despite the comings and goings of individuals, it generally undergoes alteration when the leader changes. In this process, what hopefully should not change, are the values and the purpose of the organisation, that are fundamental to the business.

This brings us to the next question.

## **What is Fundamental to the Business?**

I attribute more importance to staying focussed and getting the basics right, and believe in knowing what not to do. Having spent most of my professional life in high-growth businesses where there is a lot of change, innovation, and growth, I have found that the world is a graveyard of businesses that got distracted and started doing many different things, having lost focus from what really mattered

to their consumer. At the same time, there is an adjacent graveyard of companies which did not change or innovate, and became increasingly irrelevant.

I have a simple approach for this conundrum:

- Understand what your consumer *needs* as opposed to what your consumer *wants*. And the way to think about that is—what your consumer needs is what they are willing to pay for. In the airline business, for instance, customers may want a bunch of different things while travelling from point A to point B, like a wide seat, leather covers, red and blue carpets, a hot meal, and so on and so forth. But that is not what they are paying for. They are really paying for safely getting from point A to point B, on time, with their bags, in a courteous and hassle-free manner.
- So, understanding the needs of the consumer is extremely important, and when these needs keep changing, be mindful if your business is adapting, and make sure that your business changes just enough and just in time to stay relevant in the eyes of the consumer.

The purpose of the business has to be a combination of making an impact on people's lives, on solving a hard problem, as well as attaining profitability, which then allows you to build a sustainable business. And as long as you can stay true to that purpose, you have a higher probability of staying relevant to the needs of your consumer.

## **Combat Your Fears**

Fear of change, or rather, the unknown, has engulfed every one of us. Imagine a scenario where you have a plan and know that you must act on it, but you are not able to take that first step, or convince everybody else to take that step with you. This fear, especially in the context of businesses, is the fear of failure.



Two questions occupy centrestage in your mind at this juncture:

**What if I start off on this journey  
and am not able to achieve what  
I set out to achieve?  
What if I lose what I already have?**



To deal with the bigger fear of not losing what you already have, do not become a prisoner of your past achievements. This applies to leaders, management teams, as well as organisations. Kapil Dev, for instance, won the Cricket World Cup for India, but is also a great golfer today. If he had thought that he would have to be as good at golf as he was at cricket, he would have never picked up a golf club.

Dealing with the fear of failure involves confronting the tendency to look at things as ‘successes’ or ‘failures’. Instead, think of outcomes—if the outcome is similar to what you had expected, then your hypothesis was right, and you can keep doubling down on that. On the chance that the outcome is different from what you had thought it would be (which we would have otherwise termed as ‘failure’), think of it as an experiment which showed that your hypothesis was different and now gives you an opportunity to try another strategy.

## **Deliver Consistently and At Scale**

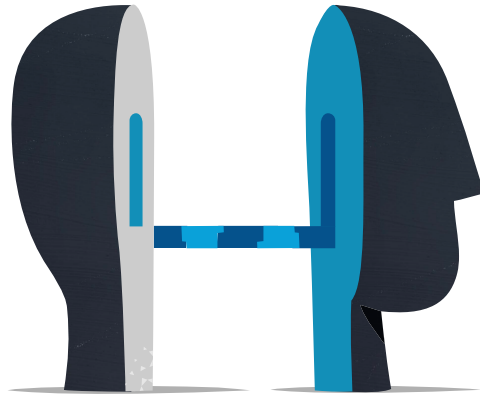
The answer to staying consistent even as the organisation continues to scale is at the end of these questions: Is your business just a little bit better than what it was yesterday? Are you reaching more consumers in a sustainable and profitable manner?

Domino’s Pizza, for example, started in 1961, and sold a thousand-odd pizzas in the first year. Now, they sell 365 million pizzas a year. And yet, the taste of the margherita pizza is the same. Even at IndiGo, the experience of the consumer remained almost consistent, whether we had 18 airplanes or 150.

## Adapt and Pivot: The Way to a Winning Mindset

Having spent 15-20 years in business, I continue to learn something new each day as I start a new brand. Here are some shifts in mindset that can support leaders and businesses in adapting to changing landscapes:

- Have a certain amount of self-confidence that does not allow natural biases to hold you back.
- Know that you do not know anything, and therefore, each day at work is going to be a learning journey.
- Respect, and treat your colleagues like gurus almost, as you are able to learn something new from each one of them. Remember that this does not have to be restricted to those in senior positions. It can be someone who is working on the line, someone who has worked for many years and is past retirement, or even someone who has just come in and has an innovative aura and unique approach to things. It serves as a good reminder that your colleagues know as much about the business or property than you think, because as a leader, you can get stuck in an ivory tower where you lose perspective of the events on the ground.
- Communicate continuously, because it helps your people engage with your ideas, understand the need for change, and get truly aligned to all that is required.



*Aditya Ghosh is a seasoned professional with over 22 years of diverse experience. Co-founder of Akasa Air, he is also Founder of Homage Advisers, Homage Ventures, Homage Foundation, and Homage Aviation. Formerly the President and Wholetime Director of IndiGo, he is currently a member of the board of directors at FabIndia Group and OYO Hotels & Homes. A World Economic Forum-Young Global Leader, he has been recognised as Fortune's global 40-under-40 and Fortune India's 40-under-40 three years in a row.*