



Leadership Edge

Leadership 101: Customise How You Lead

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Today's organisations are diverse, with their workforce spread across geographical locations, and spanning different age groups. In such a scenario, the dynamics of language, education level, and culture can pose as barriers to the collaborative needs of an organisation in general, and a team, in particular. Customising one's leadership style is an essential skill for today's leaders to motivate the individuals in their teams. Learn how to lead heterogeneous teams from Sukhjit Singh Pasricha, President and Group Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), Kotak Mahindra Bank, in this thought-provoking article.

As organisations and workplaces evolve, so does leadership, and at the core of this evolution is the workforce, the people. When the world around us is changing, can the leadership remain trapped in its approach? The answer is a resounding NO!

Leadership is a fluid practice, especially in organisations with large, heterogeneous teams distributed across the globe, with a majority of team members representing varied social, educational, linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds. Naturally, these teams work across time, space, and geographical boundaries. While having a mix of individuals offers a wide range of perspectives, enabling greater productivity and innovation, there is a flip side to it. Given the diversity in today's workforce, what motivates one team member may not work for everyone.

The N=1 Approach

Often, it is seen that diverse teams exhibit reluctance in sharing ideas, and therefore, may collaborate less effectively, defeating the very benefits of diversity. And this is where a leader needs to adopt the **N=1** approach to drive every individual optimally.

So, what is the N=1 approach, you may ask?

In simple terms, this approach refers to adopting a unique leadership style for every individual. As they say, no two snowflakes are alike, and, well, so are no two individuals. Leaders must have the ability to understand team members along with their unique attributes—what motivates them, what do they value, what do they fear, what talents do they have, what strengths and weaknesses do they possess, and most importantly, what goals propel them. This may sound like an onerous task, but a true leader will not shy away from walking the extra mile to learn the aspirations of the individuals in their team and customising their leadership style, facilitating the highest performance in everyone.

Challenges in Adopting a Customised Approach

Every leader wishes their team to be competent and the one that excels at everything. But how do you make that happen? Adopting a customised approach is vital in leveraging and unlocking the power of people, yet it can be arduous to be

the leader who caters to every individual's needs. It requires one to build a trusting and authentic relationship with the members of the team, and understand their learning styles and coaching needs.

With progressing workplace dynamics such as flexible work schedules, remote and hybrid work models, and even 'workcations', individuals are looking for roles that connect them with the purpose and goal of the organisation, and fit within their lifestyle. Today, people want autonomy in the way they function and perform. And they want it all at the same time—support at work, mentorship and coaching to help them exceed their professional expectations, and a rich work culture with a desire to deliver quality and variety at work. In fact, this very desire for autonomy is one of the many factors driving the current shift towards 'side hustles' and the 'gig' economy.

Some of the challenges faced by leaders while adopting a customised approach for heterogeneous teams include:

- Some team members may be less likely to be heard, depending on their articulation skills.
- Onboarding and integrating new members may take more time and effort.
- Messages may be misinterpreted due to language and cultural barriers.
- Team cohesion may be low, as members may not necessarily trust each other and are more likely to have conflicts.





Crafting a Customised Leadership Strategy to Overcome Challenges

Leadership is crucial to any organisation, much like the centre-of-gravity responsible for balancing. Without a poised leader at the helm—to craft strategy, mobilise the diverse workforce, and lead the business on a path of growth and continuous success—too often, businesses face burnout early on, and some even fail. To achieve this balance, leaders must reflect on their leadership style and adapt to the necessary changes







while dealing with the progressive workforce of today—the one used to getting everything customised or tailor-made to their needs, and that too, at a moment's notice. From instant gratification and feedback on social media to getting groceries delivered in under fifteen minutes to consulting a medical specialist online, etc., everything is available almost instantly. So, their work experiences cannot be different from the other aspects of their lives.

A meticulously crafted strategy directs the leadership to align the individual goals, aspirations of the team with that of the business, and helps in engaging everyone in the overall success of an organisation. This requires a leader to adopt specific measures to be able to do the best by their team, such as:

- ***Being a culturepreneur:*** Leaders, today, need to acquire new ways of thinking. It requires them to become a 'culturepreneur', as noted human capital expert Marty Parker said, in one of his books. Having a culturepreneurial mindset can help your organisation reach high levels of performance—driving human, societal, and economic successes. 
- ***Understanding the needs of each team member:*** Leaders who understand their teams can create an environment that stimulates and inspires. To be a good leader, you need to be approachable and personable. It may be challenging to understand your employees' needs if they cannot share their true feelings with you. A true leader rewards and encourages all team members as per their unique needs to provide value to every individual. 
- ***Tailoring your rewards and recognition programme:*** Understanding the unique needs of your employees allows you to create a reward-based programme that genuinely resonates with the workforce. For instance, if you have mothers in the team, they may appreciate additional flexi-time options. Alternatively, if you have employees saving for a vacation, additional revenue-generating opportunities could motivate them in new ways. 
- ***Encouraging involvement in decision-making:*** Including employees in decision-making for departmental or corporate policies will motivate them because it signifies that you value their opinions. Encouraging discussions and asking employees for their suggestions are 

important ways to let them know that their voices matter, and that they are a vital part of the team.

- ***Fostering relevant learning and career development:*** When you encourage learning relevant job skills, it is essential to give your employees ample opportunities for hands-on experience, and pair them with mentors and collaborators for feedback and guidance. It is prudent to expose ourselves to the best practices from other industries and not remain tied to our own. For instance, we often invite leaders from our own industry as well as those from other sectors, for coaching sessions with our employees. We call it the “out-in” approach to expand the horizon of learning and mentorship for our teams. 
- ***Soliciting feedback, tapping into the team’s pulse:*** It is critical to solicit feedback and ideas from all the members in the team equally, by activating multiple channels to leverage continuous listening to iterate and evolve. Then, one must provide the managers with the right tools to address employees’ concerns in an ever-changing world. For example, we don’t wait for yearly, half-yearly, or monthly meetings with our teams. We have mechanisms such as frequent ‘employee check-ins’ and daily huddles in place to monitor, and respond to the challenges faced by our teams, their professional development, and goal orientations. 
- ***Emotional intelligence and self-awareness:*** A good leader will exercise self-awareness to identify their own prejudices and those of their team members. The leader must listen, promote empathy, and help in creating proper communication channels to keep conflicts at bay. Setting up forums for your team to come forward and share their insights, ideas, and experiences, etc., may even lead to the generation of the next big idea for your business. 
- ***Cultural awareness:*** Exercise your curiosity to discover who you really have within your team, and remember to highlight differences instead of hiding them. To promote cultural awareness and identify unique traits of the team members, leaders must delegate duties in a way that every individual gets to learn from and about each other. This helps in enabling diverse voices to get fair representation during the organisational 

decision-making processes. Moreover, leaders must ensure that cultural inclusion is one of the primary elements of human capital strategy.

- **Being proactive:** A leader is expected to take decisions that matter. Occasionally, the outcomes may not be as desired. Use the voice of your employees as a compass to keep yourself informed on the outcomes of your decisions. Leaders must do course correction with an openness to accept the unexpected. For instance, having a top-down approach in seeking inputs on a new product rollout may prove detrimental if one misses out on a timely response from employees in customer-facing roles. Be proactive and reach out to your team on a regular basis, seeking their thoughts on things that matter. Being a proactive leader also helps one stay abreast with the developments within the organisation and outside. It helps in identifying and mitigating risk factors within the team. Proactive leaders are able to support their employees to plan and implement new strategies faster.



In Conclusion

Every leader wants to be the ‘ideal one’ for their team, which is not an incidental goal. Even for leaders, leading well is a continuous journey of learning, personal development, fearless introspection, and committed efforts for greater effectiveness and increased positive impact on others. Learning should not be restricted to successful attempts alone, as some of the most valuable lessons can also come from failures. When teams receive the right mentorship at work, know that they are valued, and have adequate opportunities to be heard, everything else falls right into its place.

Sukhjit Singh Pasricha is the Group Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), Kotak Mahindra Bank, since 2019. His responsibilities include overseeing all HR functions to secure long-term growth by leading training, talent acquisition, and career development activities across Kotak Mahindra Group companies. In a career spanning 25 years, Sukhjit has been in leadership positions across sectors, and in complex businesses that operate in both the B2B and B2C spaces. Prior to joining Kotak, Sukhjit was the Chief of HR and administration at Bajaj Finance, CHRO at IndiGo Airlines, and held leadership roles at Bharti Airtel, PepsiCo, and Spice Communications.