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Women leaders, influencers on skills and mindsets in a post-Covid world

Synopsis

Interviews were conducted with women leaders and influencers, across corporates, SME organizations, as well as in education and the art. Their responses all point in one unambiguous direction: that a new set of behavioural skills is needed for making the journey from survival to sustainability, in a post-COVID Indian ecosystem.



By Avik Chanda & Shubhabrata Roy

Women leaders frequently find themselves in a Gender Double Bind. Be that as Heads of State or in corporate boardroom meetings, they are expected to operate as their male counterparts, taking swift, aggressive decisions. When they do so, they run the risk of being termed 'insensitive'. On the other hand, when they proceed with patience, caution and empathy, they're equally at risk of being termed 'indecisive'. But the global pandemic, which has dismantled all narratives, has certainly rattled this particular one too, calling into sharp focus the actions, and consequences of women leaders across the world. In particular, the success of the premiers of Germany, New Zealand and Taiwan, in dealing with the outbreak,

has drawn much attentive and praise.

Think-tanks, specialist forums and the international press have published a number of pieces on this subject, the very headlines of which reflect a gender-focused sensitivity. Forbes, 19 April 2020: "[Why Do Women Make Such Good Leaders During COVID-19?](#)" New York Times, 15 May: "[Why Are Women-Led Nations Doing Better With Covid-19?](#)" Stanford Medicine (Scope), 12 May, 2020: "[Women leaders shine during COVID-19 pandemic](#)" – To mention only a few. The article in the World Economic Forum's website, published on 03 April 2020, in collaboration with Thomson Reuters Foundation Trust.org, commencing from a demographic standpoint that 70% of the world's healthcare staff are female, also has a distinctive gender-slant: "[Why we need women's leadership in the COVID-19 response](#)".

The Euronews post on 12 May, 2020, "[Coronavirus is showing yet again why the world needs more strong female decision-makers](#)" draws insightful parallels across the political arena and the corporate world, arguing that five fundamental characteristics underline the functioning of women leaders in both spheres. First, clarity; second, decisiveness; third, demonstrating compassion; fourth, strong and unambiguous communication; and finally, the ability to show empathy and solidarity. Transposing this onto the Indian ecosystem, it is interesting to ascertain the views of some of the women leaders and influencers, regarding the skills for the future.

COVID-19 CASES		Confirmed	Deaths
India	World	10,701,193	153,847

As part of the ongoing Positive Psychology-based study being conducted by NUVAH ELINT LLP and BIASINC, a survey and interviews were conducted with women leaders and influencers, across corporates, SME organizations, as well as in education and the arts. Their responses all point in one unambiguous direction: that a new set of behavioural skills is needed for making the journey from survival to sustainability, in a post-COVID Indian ecosystem.

Employer–Employee Expectations

In this component of the study, stakeholders were invited to state what they felt were the top expectations of employees from their bosses – and vice versa – in a post-COVID paradigm.

For Soonu Wadewala, Head HR, Axis Securities, the immediate imperatives of leaders is very clear: “First, transparent & consistent communication – being honest about the challenges and ambiguity we’re facing, ensuring regular touch points to share facts, seeking inputs and acknowledging failures and success. Second, compassionate Leadership – something that’s not usually displayed is now essential. This includes empathy, humility, active listening and overall influencing of the emotional health of the organization. This in turn has a direct linkage to productivity. Third, agility – the need of the hour is to create agile organizations, in particular with regard to digital agility. To facilitate technology, work on hybrid models, manage virtual collaborations, and reskill the workforce – all these require leaders to be very agile, and adapt rapidly to the changing environment.”

The primary emphasis on compassion and empathy finds great resonance with Swati Sarawgi, Director at Swarnim International School. “It’s important to recognize that everyone is facing unique challenges. For instance, in the current economic situation, there may be instances where guardians are unable to pay fees. Therefore, we have a pressing need to be more understanding towards each other. But we also have an opportunity to lead by example. At our school, each one of us has contributed a day’s salary, to give to an individual we know, who arranges food for poor children. Initiatives like this help in fostering a culture of empathy.”

For Archana Garodia Gupta, former Chairperson of the National MSME Committee, FICCI, and Director, Touchstone Gems and Jewellery, trust is key to any long-term employer-employee relationship. “Trust is crucial if you want to have a good team around you through thick and thin. Through it, both parties understand the value of the relationship. At our factory, none of the workers left in the past two months – because we took care of them during this difficult time, paying their salaries.”

Palak Vats, HR Director – HarperCollins Publishers India, carries this emphasis over to organizational culture. “Trust and openness are crucial in a work model, where leaders don’t get to have daily in-person interaction with their team members, many of whom may still need to be working from home. Consequently, the trust that is usually sustained through personal connect may get diminished. So, it becomes all the more important for leaders to communicate with great regularity, and transparency. Even bad news about the market or the firm’s business performance becomes palatable, when communicated in a tenor of openness and inclusivity.”

Skills for the Future

The stakeholders were asked to choose from and rank what they felt were the top skills needed in their respective organizations, in a post-COVID world, from a superset of 24 signature strengths. The findings show that perseverance, teamwork, originality, leadership, courage, love and emotional intelligence featured high, with 30% of the respondents ranking Perseverance at the top of their list.

“Given the uncertainty all around”, says Archana Garodia Gupta, “perseverance for me – is the most important trait to be developed. People sometimes tend to give up, rather than following things through to closure. Perseverance enables us to develop a more positive, ‘never say die’ approach in life, making us see that even such hard times are transient.”

can’t show love and compassion towards employees, then such leadership will fail. I think that going forward, equations in the workplace will be determined through human feelings and emotional connect, born out of trust.”

For Sunira Chamaria, Director, Damodar Ropeways & Infra Ltd. and Chairperson, FICCI Ladies Organization (Kolkata Chapter), teamwork and courage are the key ingredients required across organizations today. “The business situation today is really tough. Huge changes are taking place in the workplace, and this will continue for quite a while. In this context, leaders need to shift from their individual goals towards the greater common good. This is where teamwork becomes so important. A good bonding within the team helps the group as a whole, to first accept the tough situations, and then develop the collective courage to face them.”

“Empathy,” says Saira Shah Halim, educator, activist and SAARC Women’s Awardee, “is crucial in the workplace – for employees as well as leaders. The challenge is that in India, we have never been formally trained in emotional intelligence, or aspects such as cultural and gender sensitivities. People need to show understanding and encouragement, instead of judging each other. It’s time to adopt the ‘we’ approach, not ‘I versus you’ narrative.”

Ramanjit Kaur, national-award winning theatre actor-director, and Founding Director of The Creative Arts, concurs with this view. “If we can’t be kind and understanding towards each other, it defeats the whole purpose. We should acknowledge these are other human beings that we are working with, not machines. It’s only if you can empathize that you develop a deep understanding of other people – which then allows you to plan strategically and execute work effectively with them.”