

Beyond business

SANKAR RADHAKRISHNAN

'A leader should be able to motivate, and more than motivate, create enthusiasm and passion; create a dream and make the team go towards it. I think a leader in the Indian context also has to be in touch with social responsibilities.'



Perhaps the most striking thing about Anu Aga is her interest in people – little things like asking an office assistant who opens the door for her how he's doing, and actually taking a minute to listen to his reply. Not the kind of thing every corporate chief-tan is likely to do. But Aga, the Chairperson of Thermax Ltd, the Pune-based energy and environment solutions company, is no ordinary corporate executive.

An Economics graduate with a Masters in medical and psychiatric social work, Aga began her career in the family-controlled Thermax as an executive in the human resources department in 1985 and later took over the functioning of this department. In 1996, following the death of her husband, Rohinton Aga, she took over as the Chairperson of the company. In the six years since then, she's led from the front and helped the company through some tough times.

She has also been an active participant in the work of organisations such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) – she's the immediate past Chairperson of the CII Western region and the Bombay Management Association. In addition, she is also involved with organisations that promote education for underprivileged children. In an interview to Praxis, she talks about her views on leadership, the social obligations of a leader in the Indian context, the difficulties of leadership and so on. Edited excerpts:

How do you define leadership?

I think the first quality of a leader is the ability to motivate. And more than motivate, create enthusiasm and passion; create a dream and make the team go towards it. And also respect differences, because one of the things I think we've been able to do at Thermax is manage wild horses. We have different personalities at Thermax. Some companies require a very uniform profile to be a part of that company.

In ours we don't have that.

I would say also the ability to implement. You may have a dream, you may have a passion, but if you cannot implement, it doesn't help. So while you dream, you should be able to implement and keep your commitment to all your stakeholders.

Also a leader should try to create an innovative, entrepreneurial organisation, where everyone feels he belongs. Actually, Prakash (Kulkarni, the MD of Thermax) was reminding me that very often he and others who've been in the company a long time, say "we own the company more than you". Which is a very healthy thing – that psychology where, whether they own shares or not, employees feel that in the long term they can make a difference. At the same time, today's leader does not value long-term parking. People are challenged and the bar for performance keeps going up, up, up...

A leader should also have an interest in creating a learning culture, because things are changing so fast that what succeeded today may not work tomorrow. So how can the whole organisation be a learning culture? This is a question a leader should be asking.

Another leadership quality I think is extremely important is a sense of humour. I think without a sense of humour, you will be weighed down and there'll be no joy in life.

Communication is another quality. And by that I don't mean perfect English. I mean that the leader must be really able to carry the people with him, be sensitive, open, transparent. And while there is a hierarchy in an organisation, a leader should treat people as people.

Is there a social angle too?

Yes, I think in the Indian context a leader has to be in touch with social responsibilities. However well you do, if you don't pull up the country as a whole, you're asking for trouble. You cannot have a large majority of the people being unemployed, starv-



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ing and a few living ostentatiously. But, first concentrate on making good profits and give a part of it to a social cause.

For example, just now there was Gujarat. I think a leader has to take a stand. He cannot say 'my business is only business'. Corruption is another area that individuals cannot fight individually, but still you need to take a stand. These three things – poverty, corruption and communal harmony – a leader in the Indian context cannot afford to ignore this.

When you think of a leader who comes to mind?

In the corporate world, Narayana Murthy (Chief Mentor of Infosys). The things I like about him are that he's built a very successful organisation, that he's shared his profits with his employees, has lots of social commitment. He's also got a foundation where his wife Sudha is doing a lot of work - and he does not live ostentatiously, which many Indians tend to do. And his cleaning the toilet at home is symbolic in a country where

etc.
RAVIKANTH



“You acquire leadership skills, motivate people and build a great team. And then one day, you sack all of them!”

we are so conscious of 'this is not my job'. Here, where the dignity of labour is missing, I think that symbolic gesture is very important.

And outside the corporate world, right now Harsh Mander (Director of Action Aid and former IAS officer) is really my leader. He's spoken up about Gujarat in a way that has just opened up people's eyes, and he's had the guts to resign (from the IAS) and start a movement, which is so beautiful.

Leadership is to a great extent about people. Yet, tough times call for tough decisions such as lay-offs and so on. How do you as a leader cope with this?

I think those are very difficult decisions. Because, especially in a country like India, I would define an entrepreneur's or leader's role as creating jobs and not shrinking them. But unfortunately, for our own survival we have had to shrink. Otherwise all of us would have died.

So it was painful and not an easy thing to do knowing that there are not many options available for the people. In fact, in Thermax, except for reasons of integrity we had never asked people to leave. Even the under-performers were somehow managed. Unfortunately we no longer had that luxury and had to take harsh decisions.

But should a leader communicate to people the reasons for the lay-offs?

Yes, even when you ask them to leave... I'm not in operations so I've not personally done it, but I think it's very important to do it humanely. Also, give them training if possible for some alternate possibility, think of some ways in which they could be a supplier or something they could be involved in. Also, show them how to invest their money so they don't spend it and then be on the streets.

Is there a formal leadership development effort at Thermax?

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“You have a full mandate to take us out for dinner!”

Not just for leadership, but we have an excellent programme for trainee engineers. We used to put them through one year of training, which had some bit of leadership. But some of the leaders we've had from that group of engineer trainees are some of our best people.

We really were able to win their hearts and though we didn't pay them salaries or stipends anywhere near the other companies, when they compared their package with their counterparts in other companies what they felt was they were given responsibilities so fast and early -

that also grooms a leader. You know you're able to make a difference, take decisions on your own and not go up to your boss all the time. You're allowed to make a few mistakes. ■