

ELUSIVE
secrets

in

**BUILDING
ORGANISATIONAL
EXCELLENCE**

SATYENDRA KUMAR

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*In the loving memory of my parents, who inculcated values of hard work,
empathy and integrity in me; and raised me to believe
that anything is achievable.
I feel blessed.*

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FOREWORD — NANDAN NILEKANI

Chairman and co-founder Infosys Ltd; Chairman and co-founder EkStep Foundation

We founded Infosys with a simple vision, "*To be a globally respected corporation.*" This vision of excellence helped us focus on earning the respect of clients, employees, shareholders, partners, and society at large. Our core values, known as C-LIFE, established that the pursuit of excellence is a foundational and critical building block essential to earning and sustaining respect. To enable rapid growth of the company, we formalised the Quality function in 1992. In 1999, at \$100 million in revenue, Infosys became the first Indian company to be listed on NASDAQ and the 21st company in the world to be accredited CMM Level 5. This encouraged us to aim at higher global benchmarks.

I met Satyendra Kumar in 2000 when he joined Infosys as Head of Quality. We were in the early stages of learning how to apply the Baldrige Excellence Framework practiced in the US. Satyendra brought hands-on expertise in applying such frameworks and steered many organisations towards excellence. Over the next nine years, I witnessed his leadership, which was timely and invaluable. In 2009, I joined the Indian Union government as chairman Unique Identification Authority of India to catalyse Aadhaar, the world's largest digital identity platform that serves more than 1.3 billion people today. Over the

nine years that Satyendra and I were together, I saw his leadership strengthen the quality culture and enable the company to perform as a global technology leader with \$4.66 billion in revenue. The culture of excellence and the focus on earning respect for quality continues to thrive as Infosys scaled past the \$16.3 billion mark in 2022.

I recollect that every two months, Satyendra would assemble the senior leadership at Infosys to review and action the elements of a structured programme, The Infosys Excellence Initiatives. The deliberations focused on how to improve processes that deliver client value, develop talent, plan, and forecast, improve information and data, and much more. We would then engage at the Quarterly Management Council Meetings, where he would critique our performance on client projects, our ability to deliver on time, and our discipline to stay within budgets while ensuring that defects across all aspects of our operations were tending to zero. Every Quarter, Satyendra updated the Board of Directors on our performance on all dimensions of quality, what improved and where we were still challenged. His approach to building a culture of excellence focused on transparency, self-appraisal, and concrete action to reduce variability while improving predictability in all we do.

Over the last four decades of building and scaling institutions across the business, government, and civil society, I have learned and focused on three building blocks essential to drive excellence across an organisation. These are active leadership, measuring change, and the discipline to follow through. As you navigate the interesting stories, ideas and advice shared in this book; these three essentials will stand out. You will learn how leadership reinforces values, sets high expectations, and actively

engages in the development of a quality culture. This is not limited to senior leadership but the leadership demonstrated by every individual across the organisation. Once, when asked what is the single largest determinant of organisational excellence, he replied, "*Senior leadership commitment.*"

The pivotal role of measures, metrics, data, information, and insights cannot be overstated. Satyendra would take you through a journey that includes how to discern between these terms and how they are applied. He would persist and persuade that if it cannot be measured, it cannot be improved. Through this sharp focus on management by facts, Satyendra would illustrate how we must focus on empowering people to act on their data. His insights into how to build a culture of self-assessment and self-directed action played a critical role in building a scalable culture at Infosys. I believe this is a key reason why Infosys has been able to lead with quality across 50+ countries.

Finally, an action is worth more than all concepts and intent put together. To ensure consistency and reliability in an action-oriented culture, follow-through plays a critical part. I always stay alert to observe the promises that are being made and the actions that are taken. The quest for excellence needs to be supported with the discipline to follow through. As each leadership review of quality would conclude, a list of actions to be taken across the organisation would get shared. These would be traced through for implementation and reviewed for closure when we met again. Satyendra trained the Quality team and coached the leaders across the company to pay attention to this personal discipline. A do-think-do mindset is essential for excellence.

Through the pages ahead, you will find a simple and engaging distillation of the lived experiences of Satyendra. He has imbued the principles of excellence into his personal self, the teams he has mentored, and the organisation he has coached towards excellence.

Told mostly in the first person, these stories are engaging, insightful, and sometimes humorous. Satyendra is a role model of excellence and is respected across industries for his expertise in the field of quality. As a guide, he has helped professionals across organisations globally to learn from his experience and apply it to their quest for excellence.

Satyendra and I worked together at Infosys till 2009. However, after all these years, I am delighted to pen this foreword as I believe his relentless pursuit of excellence played a seminal role in the evolution of Infosys. The quality culture and practices of excellence at the foundation of the rapidly globalising organisation reinforced the confidence to exceed client expectations across cultures and contexts. As you read through this book, you will get a glimpse of what I believe are the fundamentals that need to be put into place to aspire for excellence. The best part is that you will hear them from Satyendra firsthand! I hope that the next generation of leaders invests time and patience to learn from this work and find ways to incorporate it into their leadership, culture, and the basic fabric of their organisations.

Nandan Nilekani

Bengaluru, August 2022

Chairman and co-founder, Infosys Ltd.

Chairman and co-founder, EkStep Foundation

INTRODUCTION — S.D. SHIBULAL

Former CEO and Co-Founder Infosys Ltd

I had the pleasure of meeting Satyendra Kumar (*Kumar as I call him*) in 2000 when he came to Infosys as head of Quality. Quality is one of the most complicated functions in any company. The primary function of the Quality department is to ensure that organisations deliver world-class products and services to their customers. At Infosys, they were also responsible for processes innovations, change management, audits, and certifications.

Kumar had a tough job at hand. Infosys provides consulting and system integration services to customers worldwide. The Quality department ensures not only the quality of the deliverables, but it must also come up with new ways of improving quality, along with new tools and methods for implementing the same.

Organisations resist change. Infosys was no different. Innovation leads to changes in established processes. The people should be enabled to incorporate the new processes, methods, and tools. This needs training, capacity building, hand-holding, and working closely with them.

Audits make sure that departments are doing what they are supposed to do. There are two kinds of audits — internal and external. While internal audit is done by the quality department, external audits are done by independent agencies based on

standards like ISO/CMM. Audit creates a love-hate relationship. Generally, people dislike audits. At the same time, people understand that audits are required to understand where they are and to improve. Kumar was able to reduce the friction to the extent possible.

A striking quality about Kumar is that he was able to keep his balance. He brought objectivity to all functions by using data at every point. Generally, audit reveals non-compliance in some departments, which needs to be fixed. Over a period of time, he convinced the organisation to use quarterly audit data to assess how each unit was doing. This revealed which unit was doing well and in which area. He brought in comparison in terms of compliance and some competition, too, as no unit wanted to be seen in a poor light. Other units could learn from the units doing better. Of course, there were arguments about the kind/correctness of data. Kumar's argument was that as long the data was consistent, it was fine. Even if the data was 70 percent accurate, as long as it is 70% accurate every time, one could rely on it. He created visibility of data, because of which the whole process of compliance became objective. It was not one person's view of which unit was doing better but the data that spoke. This was one of his major contributions and a game changer. It became the norm that the management reviewed this data every quarter and focused on important issues. This led to improvements. Kumar was willing to accept that things are, and will not be, perfect. It was a journey of continuous improvement over a period.

A lot of organisations get external certifications. Mainly these certifications are kept on display to be shown to customers. During the certification time, there is a frenzy of activities that

are forgotten soon after. No doubt, certification creates brand value and gains customer confidence, but it is the improvement that matters. Kumar was able to use certification to create improvements. I remember after every successful certification, Kumar and I would walk out and get into the elevator, and I would ask Kumar what the truth was. He would tell me frankly the areas which still needed improvement rather than brushing them under the carpet. While the certification process is important for the company, Kumar knew the value of the certification came from the learnings and the improvements thereafter.

While talking about innovation, one of the things Kumar created was a process consulting group. I was not very convinced at first because Infosys was not a big player in quality consulting at that point in time, and the expenditure involved did not justify the outcome. Investing a couple of million dollars seemed like a wasteful expenditure. Kumar was persistent, and I finally relented. From a brand perspective, it turned out to be a good decision. The group consulted with the customers on how to improve their functioning. This created a brand value as customers perceived Infosys as a company that they could learn from. I am happy today that I could support his vision in spite of my initial reservations.

One of the other innovations Kumar did, was account management. Quality is all pervasive. Many quality departments do not get into all facets of the organisation and focus on one or two areas. He felt that we must bring Quality to the account management process and improve the way we manage our customers. He floated the idea of auditing how our accounts are managed, making it measurable, and identifying the indicators

of good account management. Looking at Quality in every area brought in professionalism and accountability.

In Infosys, we had a lot of construction going on at that point in time which was outsourced to contractors. The construction involved several scaffoldings. We had multiple incidents of scaffolding collapses, which resulted in a number of injuries. Though it did not strictly fall into our purview, it was a big weight on our conscience. The contractors themselves were looking for help to avert these incidents. I requested Kumar to investigate the matter so that safety was not compromised. He came forward and put systems in place whereby he kept records of the number of major and minor incidents that happened at the construction sites. He started publishing data every month. Though it created some friction with the contractors, there was an immediate improvement in safety standards, as no one likes to be reminded of accidents under their watch. Kumar was able to resolve the issue, and we were able to improve safety standards. The data could be compared across contractors, and learnings were shared.

Another incident I recollect is when Kumar had a major showdown with one person from my staff. I agreed with the person reporting to me in this altercation, but Kumar did not cow down. At that point in time, I felt he was stubborn, and a major argument ensued. He was convinced that his stand was correct, and I also did not change my decision. I met him three days later, and he was surprised that I did not remember the uncomfortable incident. Kumar probably thought that he would get into some sort of trouble because of the squabble. Since our culture was transaction-based, it was natural to deal with the issue and not make it personal. This revealed that he had the

courage of conviction to stand by what he believed was right. At the same time, he accepted my decision.

We are both very system-oriented people. When he came to Infosys, there were a limited number of systems in place. We built many more, especially in the Project Management area. It was called Integrated Project Management at Infosys. These systems helped Infosys excel and earn the reputation it has today. Kumar's contribution in this area was very significant. We worked together to make Integrated Project Management a world-class system with truly Level 5 characteristics.

I remember Kumar as an open-minded person who led from the front. He never shirked taking on responsibility. His reliance on data brought objectivity and inspired confidence in people.

Satyendra Kumar has written an interesting book backed by years of experience in handling the quality department, (*of Infosys*) one of the most successful Indian start-ups. His narrative is experiential, giving guidance and insights into systems, implementation, and achieving organisational excellence. I recommend this book to everyone in the corporate world who wish to focus on organisational excellence.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Authoring a book was one of the strange and most unlikely ideas I could ever undertake. I realised many could benefit from my four decades of accumulated learning from various organisations. This was the provocation for me to write this book, where I have attempted to portray the fundamentals —that are often elusive—in building organisational excellence. And here we are; I have attempted to portray fundamentals that are profoundly essential in building organisational excellence.

There are many paths to nurturing excellence. Some prefer to focus on awards; some have elevated the brand aura to follow; some organisations sharply focus on productivity; some have sustained an audacious and innovative appetite, and some were built on a single disruptive idea. Some fundamentals will never change, no matter which trodden or untrodden track you prefer or what orientation you prescribe.

Having traversed various paths and working with some of the finest and most brilliant minds that shaped the fortunes in value creation in the business world. My role in my professional life found more significant meaning in supporting the spirit of nurturing excellence for over 40 years. Over the past decade, I have reflected on many unspoken facets that shaped my practices and found my way

into providing advice and consulting in this fascinating space. The mirage of excellence is elusive, and most often, it is not a surrogate for achieving outstanding business performance alone by measuring and surpassing business results. There is more to it than what meets the eye. In this book, I have elaborated on my knowledge's implicit, tacit, and explicit facets in building a foundation for organisational excellence.

Organisations can oscillate between the pinnacle of achieving the spirit of excellence and silently dissipating the essentials — and the only way to sustain their soul is by elevated awareness. It is no secret that some of the most reputed and admired corporate brands have made headlines for the wrong reasons. Such an occurrence is a testament to systemic failures that have crumpled the soul of excellence. There is only one way to mitigate such an occurrence: by elevated awareness and committing to action. Besides my own, I have included experiences from some who worked closely with me, intending to enrich a higher level of experience sharing.

A subject so massive and breathtakingly overwhelming — I have attempted to capture its essence in seven chapters.

I hope this book will fuel such an appetite for those who partake in maintaining the essentials of excellence by absorbing the true tenets relevant to the trodden or untrodden path you ascend to in your business world.

Often the question that begs an answer is when is a good time to initiate the excellence agenda. Be it a well-established corporation or a fledgling startup aspiring for series A, B, or C funding rounds. The right time to begin an excellence plan is

not about where your company stands — the question is whenever you are ready to open your mind to engage.

History is witness to some of the iconic brands and corporate names that have achieved and surpassed standards of excellence, yet over time, they have lost their standing. Facetiously I may say that like a leaking tank, the soul and spirit of excellence could get drained. Keeping an eye on fundamentals and elevated awareness of excellence is everyone's responsibility; if organisational excellence is intended to be instilled.

This book, I believe, will serve the leadership of large and small organisations and across the mid-management aspiring to assume a more significant role as future leaders.

Well-established companies face a challenge in instilling essentials of excellence, and this book is written to provide food for thought to be part of an induction kit for recruits. An impetus to reflect and recognise the essentials of excellence could significantly enhance the conversations in long-term value creation.

Be it an established organisation or a new startup — I have provided the essence of my professional experiences to benefit others in seven chapters. I believe this book could find meaning for those who possess an appetite to absorb the nuances.

Chapter One is devoted to setting a context for building excellence.

Chapter Two engages with the importance of staying relevant and competitive in today's global world

means that organisations need to be innovative, adaptive, and ever-changing.

You need to foster and encourage a learning culture within your organisation. Learning creates the capability and adaptability required for change. Learning forever is the only way forward.

Chapter Three dwells on the importance of how Measurements permeate every aspect of human life.

The modern world is inconceivable without measuring time, size, distance, speed, direction, weight, volume, temperature, pressure, force, sound, light, and energy — without measuring efficiencies, effectiveness, risks, and financials of their operations. Predictability of experience is something that the customer implicitly desires.

Having predictability creates a positive psychological impact on customers. Predictability leads to increased confidence and reliability in your organisation from customers. It also builds a higher trust between leaders and teams. Hidden behind that predictable experience is companies' significant effort to reach this stage.

Chapter Four elaborates on my experiences in the positive working atmosphere in an organisation that promotes a healthy work culture that affects growth, attitude, and mindset.

It helps accomplish more from your daily responsibilities and, in turn, makes organisations more productive, creates a growth mindset, and increases collaboration and employee morale. It also means you

can work in a stress-free setting that promotes your cognitive performance and physical well-being.

Chapter Five is about managing people and requires more than just assigning tasks to people.

Besides interpersonal, technical, and organisational process knowledge, leaders and managers must have abilities and sensitivities to understand their aspirations, capabilities, needs, wants, and even aberrations to leverage for optimal performance.

Business leaders must build skills to care about their people because they can make or break a company.

Chapter Six discusses dealing with market change, customer expectations change, the competitive landscape keeps pushing, and evolving technologies keep providing leverage.

Organisations cannot remain static and stagnant. For an organisation to stay relevant, its culture must evolve and adapt. Organisation leaders must promote the belief that whatever is good today might not be good enough tomorrow.

They must create a mindset for excellence. Leaders must ensure an environment where continuous improvement is a way of life.

And finally, Chapter 7 elaborates on the presence of the most elusive facets of excellence that resides in virtuous decision-making.

Despite the highest performance due to all positives, the unseen is the invisible backdrop of governance and values.

I have enjoyed writing this book, and I hope you will enjoy it as much reading it.



AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Satyendra Kumar has enhanced the quality systems for world-class global organisations with his contributions for over 40 years. He has served on several industry bodies and has received numerous awards in shaping the conversation for progress with his deep understanding of the systems view of an organisation that is a precondition for nurturing a culture of excellence.

Kumar today continues his passion by helping organisations strengthen their systems maturity by providing his rich experience as an Independent Advisor and Consultant to several large and medium scale institutions and enterprises since 2013.

Kumar was the Global Head and Senior Vice President – Productivity & Quality, Technology Tools & Software Reuse at Infosys Limited (2000 – 2013). He has worked as Vice President at IMR Global, the USA, between 1998 and 2000. As Deputy Chief Executive for Tata Quality Management Services – Tata Group between 1996 and 1998, he provided an intellectual impetus in laying the foundation for instituting the Tata business excellence initiative. Kumar's rich experience spans his consulting expertise to over 50 national and multi-national clients in areas of Business Excellence, Operational Efficiencies, Customer Satisfaction Management, Business Continuity Management, Project and Programme Management, and Quality Management.

He has served in many Boards and Panels such as Board member (*QuEST USA*), On the Panel of Judges - Wisconsin State Award (*USA*), Administrative Reforms Committee of Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and Chief Technical Advisor to the Confederation of Indian Industry – Institute of Quality. Has been a recipient of IEEE-Software Engineering Institute (*Carnegie Mellon University*) International award (2011) and honoured with the "Life Time Achievement Award for Quality and Business Excellence" by an IT industry association.



AUTHOR'S VOICE — *Why this book?*



I realised many could benefit from my four decades of accumulated learning from various organisations. This was the provocation for me to write this book, where I have attempted to portray the fundamentals—that are often elusive—in building organisational excellence. There are many paths to nurturing excellence. Some prefer to focus on awards; some have elevated the brand aura to follow; some organisations sharply focus on productivity; some have sustained an audacious and innovative appetite, and some were built on a single disruptive idea. Some fundamentals will never change, no matter which trodden or untrodden track you prefer or what orientation you prescribe.

The mirage of excellence is elusive, and most often, it is not a surrogate for achieving outstanding business performance alone by measuring and surpassing business results. There is more to it than what meets the eye.

Organisations can oscillate between the pinnacle of achieving the spirit of excellence and silently dissipating the essentials — and the elusive secret is by enhancing understanding of essentials at all levels. It is no secret that some of the most reputed and admired corporate brands have made headlines for the wrong reasons. Such an occurrence is a testament to systemic failures that have crumpled the soul of excellence. There is only one way to mitigate such an occurrence: by elevated awareness and committing to action. Besides my own, I have included experiences from some who worked closely with me, intending to enrich a higher level of experience sharing.

I hope this book will fuel such an appetite for those who partake in maintaining the essentials of excellence by absorbing the true tenets relevant to ascending to long-term success in your business world. Often the question that begs an answer is when is a good time to initiate the excellence agenda. Be it a well-established corporation or a fledgling startup aspiring for series A, B, or C funding rounds. The right time to begin an excellence plan is not about where your company stands — the question is whenever you are ready to open your mind to engage.

I have enjoyed writing this book, and I hope you will enjoy it as much by reading it.

— SATYENDRA KUMAR

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