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Uncle Sam and the oriental attraction

After a gap of 22 years, a US President is visiting India on a bilateral diplomatic mission. It's really strange how India has turned from villain to friend to villain several times in the US' eyes in the last couple of years after India's surprise nuclear tests in Pokhran. It has finally dawned on the US that India is too important a nation to be kept in isolation for long and has scheduled the President's visit to forge better ties with the country. This is an ultimate acknowledgement of India's potential in technology and business progression.

This is not the first time that India has emerged triumphant in the battle against the big daddy. The world remembers how India developed its own cryogenic technology on being denied its transfer owing to military considerations by the US. It is also common knowledge how India built its own supercomputer when the sale of CRAY computers was stalled by the US again quoting military reasons. The ability of Indian scientists to bounce back with indigenous technology to counter US denial regime speaks volumes about our intrinsic resilience. This characteristic is also precisely what made India cushion the imposition of sanctions after the Pokhran nuclear tests.

Though the 5-day trip of the US President is projected as an exercise to improve geopolitical situation in the South Asian region, the main agenda for Bill Clinton seems to be furthering better trade relations with India. And IT seems to be the overwhelming favourite. Indian IT professionals have been making significant contribution to the US economy and sometimes even leading the new media revolution in the US. The innumerable benefits that can accrue out of good business relations on the IT front with India in the long run seems to be one of the primary objectives of Clinton's visit to India. A huge contingent of around 700 business representatives proves this fact.

What is US' interest in India's software industry? For the record, India has the largest assembly of English speaking scientific professionals outside US. India is second only to US in terms of entrepreneurship development in the Net economy. More than 60 percent of the \$4 billion software exports is accounted by the US. And India was chosen by the software giant Microsoft to set up its first ever development center outside US in Hyderabad recently. With this kind of revenues earned through its strategic relations with the US, Indian industry might feel elated at the prospect of Clinton's visit to India. But the US is also equally enthusiastic about this visit, if not more. It is eager to tap the large, inexpensive and highly productive IT talent in India to cater to its evergrowing IT demand.

In any case, Clinton's visit is a significant milestone for the India Inc. which is showing signs of healthy growth off late. As far as IT industry is concerned, it is the first step towards realising the target of \$ 50 billion by 2008.

G.P. Vinaybabu

vinay_tw@hotmail.com

Five Myths Regarding Leadership, Culture Change and Technology

Patrick G. Brown is presently on the consulting faculty of the IBM Advanced Business Institute, and was on the faculty of IBM's Management Development Center. Robert M. Goett is presently a management consultant in IBM Global Services, and was on the consulting faculty of the IBM Advanced Business Institute.

Myth One: Work Groups Equal Teams

Today, in an effort to become more nimble and responsive to their markets, businesses are seeking to transform themselves from controlled hierarchies to high performance teams. Frequently, however, organizations fall short of creating truly innovative teams of workers. In the work group/task force environment, individual needs take precedence over team needs. Accountability to management is stronger than to teammates. Group member interactions may appear collegial but are often careful and guarded. Risk-taking and innovation are stifled.

By contrast, high performance teams are characterized by open and honest communications. Innovation occurs because ideas and opinions are freely exchanged. Essential to this team culture is the concept of shared accountability. This becomes the motivating force for equal participation and excellence on the part of each individual team member. The difficulty in moving successfully beyond work groups to synergistic teams lies in the fact that organizational edict can easily create the structure of teams but it cannot necessarily change behavior.

Myth Two: New Technology is Constantly Changing the Attributes of Good Leadership

For the last several years in courses at IBM's Advanced Business Institute, hundreds of senior executives have attended workshops that deal with concerns such as strategy, re-engineering, emerging technology implementation, and process design. When asked their most significant barrier to success, the overwhelming majority answered, "the culture of my organization." When compared to changing the behaviors and skills of the people in the organization, implementing new technology is relatively easy. IT is a tool that can enable leaders to implement more rapid cultural changes.

Familiarity with technology is not a leadership characteristic. Increasingly, however, it is becoming a part of the environment that all employees of an organization, especially leaders, need to understand better. The basic attributes of leadership have never changed significantly. Historical examination would reveal the same qualities to have been required of leaders for centuries.

Technology does affect the operating environment and influences the speed at which leaders must execute their skills. The networked organization has led to the concept of the "virtual organization." By the year 2010, approximately one of every five American workers will be telecommuters. The techno-onslaught of the virtual organization - that state of being without being there - is shattering traditional operating environments, accelerating the flow of information, and changing the context in which business decisions are made around the globe. In this context, information age leaders will focus on leadership traits, such as vision, collaboration, setting behavioral standards, fostering creativity, and encouraging organizational learning. Success will be defined as a mix of personal contact and the use of tools to enable collaboration, because of the "virtual" structure of the subordinate team. New technology cannot substitute for leadership skills, though it can enhance them. Emerging technologies will allow more robust communications and reduce the importance of physical location as a key factor in organizational collaboration. The skillful business leader in the 21st century will recognize and understand technology as the strategic enabler of these vital characteristics in a highly dynamic business environment.

Yet with everything technology is doing to influence the context of leadership, the basic personal and professional characteristics attributed to effective leaders remain the same.

Myth Three: Culture change is more difficult to implement today than it was in the past

As the business world has become more chaotic, fewer organizations are embracing traditional, hierarchical, command-and-control structures. That structural shift away from what has historically existed looks easy "on paper," but the human behavior changes that are required with the shift are enormous. Global markets, deregulation measures, technology change, and the need for speed are making executives rethink the mantra, "This is the way we always do things." They are sensing that a major part of the solution lies within an organizational culture change. While the current drivers of change are numerous, enacting a culture change today is no more difficult than in the past.

One of the difficulties in bringing about change in an organization is that you must do so through the persons who have been most successful in that organization, no matter how faulty the system or organization is. To such persons, it is the best of all possible organizations, because look who was selected by it and look who succeeded most in it. Yet these are the very people through whom we must bring about improvements.

Should organizations not bother attempting to address it because it has been a known problem for at least two centuries? And should the decisions for cultural change be left to the "inner circle" of management? Is there any hope for those outside of senior management to implement culture change? Things may not be as hopeless as they seem. Let's examine the next Myth.

Myth Four: Only CEOs can change culture

Can an organizational culture really change without orders from the top? Can the process of leading a culture change be sustained from anyone but the CEO?

Leaders can be found at all levels in an organization, and it does take effective leadership to change organizational culture. If a leader lacks the power to sanction cultural change, he or she must gain the sponsorship of someone with that sanctioning power. This power usually includes control of capital and other resources within the organization. Combined with sustaining sponsorship, it will enable culture change to occur.

Ultimately, culture change requires top-down sponsorship, but the concept can "hatch" and "incubate" at lower organizational levels. The culture change may spread laterally or upward prior to receiving the support that will enable it to be accepted throughout. Critical to its ability to proliferate is its success within the piece of the organization in which it is operating.

Myth Five: Leadership does not exist outside the management team

The aftereffects of the re-engineered and downsized organization include fewer management positions, and more emphasis on cross-functional teams. The impetus remains to respond more quickly than competition in an increasingly dynamic marketplace. The result has been fewer managers and more team leaders. However, while the shift is underway to organize teams, the leadership of many teams is being selected by conventional means. This bypasses underutilized potential, i.e., the undesignated leaders within. These informal leaders often emerge despite this, helping solve a scarce resource problem for the organization (many organizations lack sufficient leadership). Others do not emerge, yet have the ability to be effective leaders. This untapped, underutilized leadership capability needs to be identified, nurtured, and rewarded. Creating an environment that encourages prudent risk taking and does not merely punish for mistakes will give people the courage to convert their knowledge to action.

One may conclude that the responses to each myth above are different ways of saying there is nothing new. When one examines the characteristics of leadership and the process of changing cultures, we agree. It is, however, the technology and its use that are changing rapidly. Many of these technologies can assist and enable effective leadership. Leaders need to understand technology and its impact on the context by which organizations and people need to be led. The basic leadership tenets, however, remain the same in a high technology world.

Patrick G. Brown is presently on the consulting faculty of the IBM Advanced Business Institute, and was on the faculty of IBM's Management Development Center.

Robert M. Goett is presently a management consultant in IBM Global Services, and was on the consulting faculty of the IBM Advanced Business Institute.

In Box

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Your publication is full of useful information and I enjoy reading the same. Digital Age should carry more classifieds and appointments in its coming issues. It should carry more articles on e-commerce and technology.

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