



## EXTRACT

# Learning to lead with a ‘Himalayan mindset’

Summitting a peak can teach one lessons about oneself, as well as teamwork, true leadership, engagement and empathy

Prateek Raj

Good organisations attract skilled people who accentuate, build and nurture their capabilities. Skilled people do not wait to be told what to do or for a position where they can finally showcase leadership. Leadership is not a position at the top, to be attained one day. It is an everyday mindset.

Organisations can create a culture where people are of two types: the evasive or engagement type. In evasive organisations, only some, if any, have a leadership mindset. Instead, a culture exists of being ‘yes men’ or victims. DuPont showcased this culture of evasion when no one took responsibility for their products and got away with Teflon poisoning. In such organisations, even those who fill leadership positions tend to be more like a ‘boss’ than a leader.

In engagement-type organisations, people have a mindset of leadership, which is diffused in the organisation’s culture and incentives, where each employee is called upon to be an agent of change. Here, all employees are expected to be leaders. Toyota and Apple showcase this culture well, where their workers and engineers are agents of change, and the organisation’s success depends entirely on their grounded actions.

We often have certain limiting beliefs about ourselves. ‘I am not fit for this job’, ‘I cannot lead’. However, such beliefs are often based on anecdotal experiences or inferences from our life histories. Someone who has never had a chance to lead may think they are not good, even if they can quickly adapt when a challenge arises. At times, such self-limiting beliefs could be a result of internalised stereotypes, which especially hurts marginalised groups: ‘I am gay, so I will never be accepted as a leader’, or ‘I am a woman, so I cannot be assertive’.... We often live ... below our full physical and mental potential. We give up at the first instance of discomfort. But when pushed to the limit, our body and mind change gear to a higher level.

Consider the locals who live in the cold, rugged Himalayan terrain. They possess extraordinary endurance and strength as they adapt to new physical limits. Can we develop endurance and strength like them? Yes; if we do not match them, we can at least go far beyond our baseline. When a challenge meets the right mindset, we can discover that we can gear up and perform beyond our physical, mental and skill limits.

At IIM Bangalore, I took students to the Himalayan Mountain Challenge to teach them about collaborative leadership. My first and most difficult expedition to the Himalayas was in December 2019, where, with a team of students, I trekked to the Kedarkantha peak in waist-deep snow and sub-zero cold as part of the course organised by trekking company India Hikes.



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Such cold threw us out of our comfort zone as we camped, cooked and survived the three days of ascent and two days of descent.

Hierarchies broke down in such adversity as everyone helped each other. At several moments we felt like giving up, feeling unprepared for the mental and physical challenge. But, with the right mindset and prior training, our body and mind shifted gears. As the days passed and we witnessed pristine sights and trails, we also began to discover our untapped reservoirs of resilience. While the first few days were tough, on the summit day and later, the challenges no longer looked daunting, and we found humour in the situation. The summit day

was the toughest, yet we were better prepared. We woke up at 3 a.m., had breakfast, washed the utensils in freezing water, folded our tents and began the steep climb by 5.30 a.m. while it was

still dark. This time, the climb, too, seemed more accessible, even though it was steeper. We reached the peak by 10 a.m., climbing faster than on the previous two days.

Once we reached the summit, a dose of adrenaline, released by the sense of achievement and the unadulterated beauty of the Himalayan peaks, overpowered us. We had another challenge—descent—which would take another six hours until we reached our base camp. It was more challenging than expected, putting significant stress on our knees. But, by now, trekking had become fun. Some slid in the snow, others sang along. There were still discomforts. Yet, it all seemed trivial in the face of the adventure.

When we reached the base camp, we pitched our tents and cooked for a big dinner party. This time, despite the long, cold day, we were more content. The trek taught us a sage quote often

attributed to Edmund Hillary, the first person to climb Mount Everest, “It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.”

The Himalayan Mountain Challenge programme is particularly challenging because of the snow and windy cold which is psychologically draining. As the lead of the programme, I have found most noteworthy how different teams handle the situation. A few teams have an unpleasant time as they complain and feel trapped in an unwelcome situation, feeling a sense of victimhood. However, other teams facing the same situation are happy and enthusiastic for most of the trek, and have the most collaborative members. These teams are largely randomly allotted, so then what creates the difference? The emergent team dynamics.

Pushing the limits is not just about an individual’s mindset. Teams make a difference for their members by enabling them, and an individual member can make a difference to their team by being a source of inspiration. Individuals in

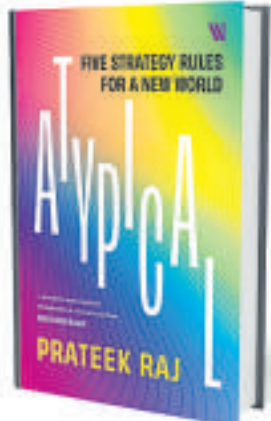
engaged teams can push their limits as team members motivate and support each other. However, in evasive teams, individuals give up faster, get demotivated and overwhelmed by their problems, often entering into conflicts and spiralling. Two teams, with minor differences in mindset can create two contrasting relational contracts within themselves, which then become crucial in determining their success or failure. Beyond physical endurance, strength and mental capabilities, our psychology significantly impacts our ability to face challenges. ...

During a long climb in a harsh environment, each trekking day presents a long psychological journey and needs to be divided into smaller goals so that teams are not overwhelmed. Let’s have a bite of this snack when we reach the meadows thirty minutes away; ‘Let’s take rest at the water point forty-five minutes from now’; ‘We have climbed 500 feet up from the last point!’. At the Kedarkantha trek, whenever we achieved the small goals, no matter how small, it filled us with motivation. Celebrating such small wins boosted the teams’ morale. ... Dividing tasks among members helped, too. Everyone does not have to be a pro at technical tasks.

On a trek, you cannot fire your team members. Everyone must reach the destination. Hence, it becomes a remarkable lesson in the leadership of not just bringing people together but also using empathy to understand what the team members need, what they are good at and what would motivate them better... Teams that manage to get everyone together have a much better time. It is what I call ‘the Himalayan mindset’. True leadership lies not in titles or positions but in a mindset of utmost engagement, empathy and resilience.

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**Atypical: Five Strategies for a New World**  
By Prateek Raj, Westland,  
248 pages, ₹499

Individuals in engaged groups can push their limits as team members motivate and support each other



## MONDAY MOTIVATION

## A simple trick to deal with work challenges

Allianz Partners’ head on taking the solution-oriented approach at work

Shail Desai

After completing a master’s degree of business administration from the Institute of Management Technology, Ghaziabad, Charu Kaushal took on her first sales role in the late 90s. Her presence at the office drew wonder, scepticism and support in equal measure, besides a few challenges as well.

“Back then, leadership roles were less accessible and biases were more apparent. There were moments I had to put in extra effort to ensure that my contributions were acknowledged and heard. Those experiences helped me grow and become more resilient,” says Delhi-based Kaushal, managing director, Allianz Partners India.

Over the past decade, Kaushal has observed significant progress as more offices have embraced diversity and inclusion. “Women often bring empathy, collaboration, a balanced perspective and emotional intelligence to leadership roles. Research also suggests that they tend to be better at caring, mentoring and developing others... These qualities foster stronger team dynamics,” she says. She adds that the gender pay gap and career progression for women still need to be looked at.

In an interview with *Lounge*, Kaushal talks about mentorship and why it’s important to prioritise well-being. Edited excerpts:

### Who do you consider your mentor?

I have had many mentors throughout my career of over 27 years. I have been fortunate to work with exceptional leaders, both female and male. They have taught me the value of perseverance, guided me in navigating challenges and instilled the confidence to pursue new goals. **One major insight you worked on with your mentor’s guidance?** I learnt to approach challenges with a solution-oriented mindset rather than feeling overwhelmed. This perspective has served me well throughout my career.

### What does being a mentor mean to you? How do you mentor colleagues?

Being a mentor means providing a psychologically safe space for mentees, allowing them to have open dialogues and discuss any challenges they might face. This helps them unlock their true potential. At work, I mentor colleagues by offering constructive feedback, sharing my experiences and encouraging them to take ownership of their growth.

### Any book or podcast you would recommend about mentorship and growth?

I highly recommend *My Life in Full* by Indra Nooyi and *Ikigai*. Both provide valuable lessons on mentorship and personal growth.

Monday Motivation is a series in which business leaders discuss their mentors and their work ethics.

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# How collaborative philanthropy helps gender inequality

By committing to bold investments and building strategic partnerships, philanthropy can drive transformative change

Aditi Premji

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also a crucial driver of inclusive and sustainable development. Yet, in the Global South, entrenched gender inequality remains a significant barrier to social and economic progress. Women and girls in these regions face persistent challenges in education, employment, leadership and financial independence, limiting their personal potential and constraining their countries’ overall growth. These disparities are exacerbated by systemic inequalities and the lingering effects of colonialism, which disproportionately affect marginalised communities. Historically, global conversations on gender equality have been dominated by voices from the Global North, leaving those from the Global South underrepresented.

Philanthropy has an increasingly important role to play in advancing gender equality, particularly in the Global South.

According to OECD’s August 2024 policy paper, *How Philanthropic Foundations Support Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment*, philanthropic giving towards gender-focused initiatives in developing countries has tripled over five years, from 2017 to 2022. Domestic funding for women’s empowerment has also risen, though at a slower pace than cross-border contributions. While these trends are encouraging, there remains a pressing need for more systemic approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality, rather than just alleviating symptoms.

Indian foundations have emerged as key contributors to causes such as reproductive health, family planning, combating violence against women and girls, and supporting women’s rights organizations. As per the same paper, between 2016 and 2019, 11 foundations based in India contributed \$72 million to such causes, highlighting the essential role of local philanthropy in advancing gender equality across the Global South.

*The Global Gender Gap Report 2024* paints a sobering picture of gender inequality in the Global South. Southern Asia’s score of 63.7%, ranking seventh out of eight global regions, highlights the deep-rooted challenges women face in achieving parity. Education, a key factor in breaking cycles of poverty, remains out of reach for many with 129 million girls



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globally out of school, many of whom are concentrated in the Global South.

The report warns that at the current rate, it will take 134 years to close the global gender gap, “roughly five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target” for gender equality. This gap is not just a reflection of systemic barriers, but of the millions of women whose opportunities for education, employment and leadership remain constrained by social, cultural

and economic factors.

The World Bank’s findings underscore this disparity, revealing that only 32% of working-age women in the Global South participated in the labour force in 2023, compared to 77% of men. A complex web of obstacles—including limited access to education, unpaid care responsibilities and discriminatory labour practices—continues to stifle women’s economic potential across the region.

Recent research by Bridgespan and

Dasra shows that collaborative philanthropic funding has grown significantly over the past decade, driven by increasing wealth accumulation and a rising interest in philanthropy. These collaborative funds, which pool resources and expertise from various stakeholders, offer a promising alternative to traditional philanthropic models in addressing complex social challenges. In the Global South, the number of collaborative funds has grown to at least 175 in the past two decades. Of the 70 funds that participated in a Bridgespan survey, 42% were launched in the last 10 years, and 76% in the last 20 years, reflecting the increasing appeal of this model.

Gender equality has emerged as the common focus of these collaborative funds, followed by environmental justice and climate change. By fostering stronger multi-stakeholder partnerships, these initiatives can catalyse far-reaching changes, unlock greater community engagement and ensure more efficient resource use, creating a collective impact that extends across generations.

Co-Impact’s Gender Fund, based in London and focusing on women-led organisations in India, Asia, Africa and Latin America, exemplifies the potential of collaborative philanthropy in addressing gender inequality. By pooling funding and expertise, it provides flexible grants and

strategic support to locally-rooted partners advancing gender equality and women’s leadership across health, education and economic systems. The fund aims to deploy \$1 billion by 2030. Similarly, the Doria Feminist Fund showcases the power of collaboration in supporting feminist movements across the MENA region.

For philanthropy to achieve lasting impact, collaboration with governments is essential. While philanthropy can provide fast-moving risk capital to test and scale innovative solutions, it is government infrastructure, resources and policy-making power that enable these initiatives to grow and sustain their impact. By working together, philanthropy can catalyse system change, while governments can institutionalize it, ensuring that progress is sustainable and scalable.

By committing to bold, long-term investments and building strategic partnerships with governments and local communities, philanthropy can break down entrenched barriers and drive transformative systemic change. Now is the moment for philanthropy to act with vision and purpose, seizing the opportunity to create lasting, meaningful impact to advance gender equality.

Aditi Premji is based in Bengaluru.

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