

Mariam Mamsa interviews Kamran Rizvi

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What are some of the defining moments in your career that have shaped your leadership style?

Your question reminds me of the saying: 'It's not what happens to you, but what you do with what happens to you, that matters.' Our early childhood experiences shape our beliefs and paradigms that help us see our world, and interpret our experiences in a particular way. Therefore, before describing the defining moments in my career, I would like to reflect on some pre-career events.

My mother has had a tremendous influence in my early life. I learned the value of commitment, sacrifice, determination and the importance of challenging status quo. My siblings and I received plenty of love and attention, even though at the time my mom was struggling with a bad marriage and seeking a divorce. She protected us from the trauma of a disturbed home life and went out of her way to give us a good life – a life of plenty, even though she had very limited means. She believed in us and in our infinite potential.

My mother ensured she kept custody of her children and re-married in 1969. Our family was complete again. Both my mother and father (I cannot say "step-father", as he has been more than a father to us) went on to provide us access to the best schools. Through their constant guidance, love and strictness, we acquired good education, developed a sound character and engaged socially with the larger family and their circle of friends.

Even though I was very shy right into my teens, I later developed self confidence. During my very early childhood, my father then, worked for PIA (Pakistan's national career). He got posted to different stations abroad and within the country. As a result of his movements, I had changed eleven schools till I reached metric (class 10)! In an uncanny way, attending new schools helped me in later life. I was able to easily adapt to different people and situations.

We moved as a family to London in 1972. At the time, I was 14. Here I was, in a new land – I got my first real taste of what can best be described as a 'civil society'. In England I experienced respect for human beings; respect for the rule of law; waiting for your turn in queues; and attending to personal chores like washing dishes, making your own bed, polishing your own shoes...There was dignity in labor!

I started my career as a management trainee in BCCI, Abu Dhabi in 1976. After a year away

from home, I returned to London in 1977 and continued with the same employer.

At BCCI, I came across the towering personality of Late Agha Hasan Abedi - a man of vision. His outlook on life and his management philosophy has left an indelible mark on me.

In 1981, my dad introduced me to a Dale Carnegie course. I was reluctant at first, but he convinced me to take part in it by tempting me with facts like: the course was being held at the Waldorf – a 5 star hotel; there would be an array of refreshments; and I might also get to meet interesting people! I agreed. Thank God I did, as it changed my life for ever.

There I was on day 1 of the course, among 30 participants, all Anglo-Saxon whites, and I, the only South Asian. The room was laid out theatre style with an aisle running through the middle. I had taken a back seat, thinking that I will listen to lectures, and then escape when break time came. This was not to be!

Eddie Roads was taking the class. Soon after making his welcome remarks and introduction to the program, he announced that every one of us will get an opportunity to speak for one minute on the topic: "The Happiest Day in My Life." This was it! I wanted to run. I turned to the exit and found two Dale Carnegie volunteers positioned next to the door. I didn't have the courage to face them. There was no way out!

My heart was beating louder...I wondered when my turn would come. And about 15 minutes later, Eddie called out my name, "Kamran...!" I almost died!! But got up and nervously walked to the front of the class. I faced the class, with my eyes rolling in all directions. My mouth was dry...heart was pumping... knees shaking. I would have wet my pants, if my bladder was weak! I wanted to hide! My mind was whizzing with random thoughts. I don't recall what I narrated clumsily, but whatever it was, it must have been okay...Eddie was most encouraging as he debriefed my talk, like he had done for others before me. I felt utter relief as I returned to my chair.

That same night, I remember passionately sharing my experience of the course, with my parents, wife, brother and sisters who listened to me intently! I couldn't stop talking!

From this day on (1981), my life took a positive turn. I had developed a positive mental attitude. My newfound confidence and skills helped me in my personal and professional life as I was better at managing relationships through effective communication. I started conducting meetings and happily volunteered to lead improvement projects.

Now I come to the defining moments in my career that have shaped my leadership style. It's the decisions we take in a given context that helps define each moment. The significant ones include:

1976 to 1990 were unrepeatable years of my life. I was exposed to the innovative thinking and unique management philosophy of Late Agha Hasan Abedi, founding chairman of BCCI – a well-known international bank, that was ultimately shut down at the directions of the Federal Reserve Bank (US central bank) in July 1991. My learnings came mostly through my father and

other mentors. Mr Abedi's philosophy fuelled my idealism.

My years in BCCI taught me big thinking, developed in me a one-world vision – grand and majestic, the art of the possible, passion for serving humanity, and sharing and giving widely and indiscriminately - the gifts we all are blessed with.

In 1985, while performing Hajj, I realized the strangle-hold of vanity on me. I was able overcome this disease, and regained my honest relationship with God when I finally decided to have my head shaved.

I often narrate this, "I performed Hajj in 1985, but found God in 1987- in Glasgow!" I was in a state of extreme despair when faced with upcoming MBA exams at the University of Strathclyde. There was no way I could see myself clearing the exams that were due in a month. Pressure was mounting. In this darkest hour of my life, I found hope and enlightenment when I turned to God. God listened to me. I felt His presence. My faith in Him has been unswerving since then.

Resigning in June 1990 after serving BCCI for fourteen years was a huge step for me to take, particularly since I had no idea what I will do next! At the time I was head been of training in the UK for six months. The bank was going through turmoil caused by the global controversy following the 1987 Miami Scandal that was fanned by the media (electronic and print) worldwide.

At the time (1987), there were 14,000 thousand employees in the bank, made up of ninety eight nationalities, working in 72 countries in the world. I would have continued with the bank, so long as I could see that there was at least one senior executive at the helm, who cared for and lived by the bank's values.

Top leadership had been shaken out by regulators in London and elsewhere. The bank had virtually become a "headless chicken". Newly formed, faceless committees and auditors were making apparently rash decisions on a daily basis, which were contrary to the values of the bank I had grown up with.

I've always held that my ultimate loyalty lies with values and principles that are eternal and ever-present. No single organization can claim a monopoly on values. I had faith that as long as I remain true to principles I held dear, I will never starve. This belief gave me the courage to take the big step of leaving a secure job.

My first real personal and ethical challenge came three years after founding KZR in 1991. By 1994 KZR had attained an impressive profile in the market with four top trainers and consultants. We looked unbeatable in the Pakistan market. However, behavior of two of the lead trainers was not aligned to the 'KZR Way'. It would have been convenient for me to compromise by ignoring this internal discrepancy and carry on with 'business-as-usual'. Instead, I ensured that they resigned, despite the risk of adverse market perception this would create. Thankfully, we survived, and have grown since! This decision set a precedence that will hopefully endure in all the organizations that KZR has spawned in the 21st century. Navitus and

School of Leadership (SoL) are glowing examples of KZR's legacy today!

Nations, communities, families and organizations get into trouble when they are at the mercy of megalomaniacs. I favor principles over personality as it ensures congruence, continuity and consistency through shared decision making and wider ownership of processes.

The training and development industry is crowded with examples of self-projection. It's an industry dominated by big names like Stephen Covey, Dale Carnegie, Tom Peters, Deepak Chopra and the like. Despite this trend, I have preferred to be in the company of stars, by being 'a star amongst stars'. This reflects a thought, "Be outstanding, but don't stand out" that I have cherished for years.

In June 1999, I was able to see my long held belief in teamwork, institutionalization and succession play out. I had consulted with my team and decided that KZR had to be led and managed by someone other than myself from Jan 2000 onwards. A formal succession process began in earnest. In Dec 1999, in KZR corporate division's first formal quarterly meeting, a young person, who had been with our organization for only two years, with no previous work experience, emerged as KZR's first business head. This outcome established the value of participation in decision making.

Merit was seen as the ability to learn, take responsibility, and be sincere to the cause and true to agreed principles. Merit would guide people decisions and not age and experience.

Jan 2003, saw the idea of succession develop further. In the first quarterly meeting of KZR's corporate division, I made the announcement that I will be retiring from KZR by Dec 2005. I also mentioned that I will be handing over a major part of my equity to team members who have contributed significantly in growing the corporate business of KZR.

This gave us three years to manage the transition. In the ensuing months, a new entity was created, called Navitus, a private limited company with four directors, including myself, each owning 25% of Class A shares.

The name Navitus was contributed by my team after considerable brainstorming. Navitus formally started life in April 2004 by taking over the entire business of KZR's corporate division.

I moved to Canada in Jan 2006 to start a new life.

Of course, there are a few other defining moments in my life that I remembered while reviewing the ones above. This exercise has helped me to decipher my own leadership style summarized below:

- Principle centered
- Firm and fair
- Participative
- Assertive

- Visionary
- Inspiring
- Team-oriented
- Meritocratic

P.S. I think my colleagues and members of my family would have a better say in the matter.

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In your view, are leaders born or do individuals develop themselves into leaders?

Leaders are born and made! As I see it, every one living on earth is a leader from the moment the person acquires consciousness and starts taking responsibility for the outcomes he/she creates in life. The reason I say 'every one' is because as human beings we are all accountable for our deeds and possess the ability (potential or actual) to influence others.

How effective each person is as a leader is quite another matter! For this reason, leadership development is essential. However, leadership cannot be taught in the classroom only. Just like you teach a person to swim in water, leadership lives in action and needs to be practiced in the community, within families, and at work.

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What is your personal style of leadership during times of crisis or a major disruption in the business?

Crisis could be described as a dangerous or a worrying time. It's a situation or period in which things are very uncertain, difficult, or painful, especially a time when action must be taken to avoid complete disaster or breakdown. Some of the defining moments in my life could be termed as a crisis. With God's help, I have lived through quite a few and each crisis has opened up a new world for me. I think what has helped me through each testing situation was my decisiveness, which came from clarity of values.

Over the years, however, I have developed to some extent the ability to deal with ambiguity and situations that appear to be a crisis, in a more considered and calmer fashion. If a situation permits, and it often does, I step back and think through the implications of what is happening; who all are likely to be affected; what are the possible courses of action open to me; and what

are their consequences likely to be. With practice, such considerations can be processed in the mind in a matter of minutes.

I have come to realize that we often tend to create a crisis by magnifying an event beyond all proportions. In this regard, I recall having lost my cool on a few occasions. But thanks to my team members - they were able to save the day and help bring order to chaos.

Of course there are exceptional situations where a crisis would warrant a spontaneous response. In such a case, our survival instincts would kick in, if we have not trained our subconscious mind for facing such eventualities. For example, fighter pilots are trained on simulators and undergo extreme situations and maneuvers repeatedly, to heighten their nanosecond intuitive response capability.

In short, it's essential to stay calm, and keep things in perspective, before rushing into action. Only a relaxed mind functions optimally.

The value of a ship's captain is not when the weather is pleasant and the sky is clear. A captain rises to the occasion when the storm rages and visibility is reduced to yards!

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What skills do young people need to develop today in order to be a successful leaders tomorrow?

I am assuming 'a young person' to be somewhere between the ages of 18-24.

A young person would excel in life with a clear sense of direction, patience, greater awareness of self and others, and a good sense of the opportunities and threats that exist in the local and global environment.

Young people tend to be very energetic, full of idealism, and ambition. They often think individualistically though, unless they exposed to learning experiences that build empathy and teamwork. They can also be rather impatient. Let's not forget that lately, media has influenced our youth considerably, by shaping their values around things, brands, and speed e.g. the MTV culture of short attention spans and hyper activity.

The good news is that young people respond very positively to development activities that combine fun with learning. By far the best way to help young people learn about leadership skills is through team sports. Games like basketball, hockey or cricket, if framed appropriately, can provide deep insights and help young people develop skills in the following areas:

1. Self-confidence and confidence in others
2. Cooperating with others
3. Flexibility in thinking
4. Strategy and tactics
5. Taking the lead when needed
6. Followership
7. Resolving conflicts
8. Sharing in success
9. Taking responsibility
10. Influencing
11. Focus on common goals
12. Thinking win/win
13. Playing on strengths
14. Esprit de corps

Skills, like those mentioned above, when combined with requisite technical knowledge in areas like engineering, medicine, economics, environment etc., prepare young people to embark on successful careers and business ventures.

Other learning avenues for young leaders are conferences like YLC (Young Leaders' Conference), a well-known annual program run by SoL (www.sol.edu.pk) for youth. In addition, management seminars and other short skill-building courses like project management, proposal-writing, presentation and communication skills help immensely.

By attending conferences, conventions, seminars, and workshops, young people can expand their knowledge and awareness about themselves and about the world in which they live. Such events are also a great place to network and find projects in which to volunteer.

When our young people develop a broader perspective on life and what it offers, and see themselves as interconnected with diverse beings, with whom they need to collaborate for a common good, positive results will accrue.

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What is your leadership philosophy?

Leadership is a great responsibility, and it can manifest in our lives as soon as we become aware that: "if it is to be, it is up to me!" Keeping this principle in mind, leaders go about accomplishing great deeds by engaging others – as many as the cause demands.

Leadership is about people and getting the best out of them. This can be done through coaching, mentoring and through a variety of other models of cooperation and collaboration.

The beauty of leadership is that it's not a formal role conferred upon us by someone else. It is not a position, but a set of actions we take as individuals that attracts people to what ultimately becomes a shared vision of a project or an organization.

Leadership is as much about followership as it is about providing direction and aligning human energy. Therefore, we will find that great leaders are also great at following others. In other words, leading and following are two sides of the same coin we call "leadership".

I believe that effective leaders are great listeners and talkers. They are driven by the need to develop better leaders than themselves and deliberately go about seeking worthy successors who can carry the mission forward.

Mark of a great leader is also the extent to which he/she liberates and empowers others. By sharing power, leaders remain safe from the corrupting influence of power, particularly when it concentrates in a single person.

I learned from Prof. Heifetz of Harvard University that leadership begins by confronting tough realities. Effective leaders see 'comfort zones' as enemies to progress. Great leaders will forever seek better and more effective ways to achieve desired goals.

Leaders speak with conviction, but keep an open mind. They welcome criticism and remain receptive to guidance and feedback from their constituents and other stakeholders of their enterprise.

In short, leaders need to be credible. This quality reveals itself in time, through many sacrifices a leader makes along the way.

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To what extent does innovation influence your competitive advantage?

I would say that innovation is at the core of our continuing success.

In order to stand out from the 'crowd' of competition and to gain the attention of the audience, it is essential for us to be clearly seen and be recognized. Therefore, understanding who we are, Institutionalizing our identity and communicating our originality is what makes us distinct, visible and attractive.

When I started out in the field of training and development, I deliberately used a style and

language that was unfamiliar to my audience. I was aware that in the early 90s training was suffering from a bad image in the minds of the decision makers. Training was seen as a waste of time by most corporate heads. They can hardly be blamed for this. Trainers in those days gave lectures and the process was hardly engaging. Keeping this in mind, I started using new and unfamiliar words knowing that this would open new files in their minds.

For example, when phoning a company, after exchanging courtesies, the person at the other end would ask me, "What is 'K.Z.R.'?" And I would confidently say, "It is Kudos; Zeal & Renewal!" On hearing these unusual words, further questioning would stop and my call would be put straight through to the decision maker. However, there would be others who would dare to go to the next question, "What do you do?" And my reply would be, "We develop the human factor in organizations!" And this, too, would, more often than not, get the call moving to the intended individual.

Similarly, to encourage continuous innovation in our trainings, we follow the "loose/tight" method in all our learning interventions. This is to say, that we remain "tight" (focused) on agreed objectives, but "loose" (flexible) in the process that leads to desired outcomes.

Today, my colleagues in Navitus, SoL and elsewhere have evolved their own innovative practices and enjoy the freedom and discipline that the "loose/tight" model provides.

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How can an organization successfully differentiate itself from the competition, and sustain this competitive advantage over time?

This can be done by: 1) Continuous learning; 2) Benchmarking; and 3) unleashing the inherent brilliance of people.

People are very creative and have ideas of value. By deliberately engaging them in strategic planning sessions, quality improvement programs and product development projects, a company can reap untold benefits.

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How do you integrate new people into an organization so they are quickly "additive" to the team, performing beyond an individual level?

Through a warm collective welcome; free sharing of information - an open SWOT (Strengths; Weaknesses; Opportunities; Threats) of the business; connecting the individual to the big picture; and having a clear set of mutual expectations.

A culture that celebrates differences and is focused on high performance goals that are aligned to the corporate vision and mission will help screen new people. Those who join will deliver!

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Competitive advantage today is gained through people, innovation, and the ability to change with the needs of a dynamic marketplace. How do you create an innovative culture that welcomes change?

Encourage mistakes and ensure that learning is taking place with each mistake. See that mistakes are not repeated. Create a learning organization. Dr Peter Senge's work is of immense value in this regard.

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Have the skill-sets to be successful as a leader changed over the past few years?

Yes! Leaders today need to be more intuitive, more humane, exceptionally empathetic, and savvy across cultures. In addition, ability to build trusting relationships in a virtual work environment, across borders, is at a premium!

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What is the role of HR in today's organizations?

HR needs to be a strategic partner to the business. From being purely a staff function, it needs to share in line responsibilities and be held accountable for agreed deliverables. HR needs to demonstrate how it adds tangible value through its interventions to attract and grow people!

Corporate culture, if it's conducive, will take care of retaining those that the business needs. Succession planning and its execution, and knowledge management are the key areas where HR can make a real positive impact to any enterprise.

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In your experience what percentage of executive recruits want to pursue a career as a leader?

I have no percentages in mind. In my view, all executive recruits need to lead and manage!

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What trends do you see in terms of leadership?

Intercultural competence, emotional and spiritual intelligence, and the ability to deal with ambiguity, are becoming essential, in addition to other classical requirements of leadership.

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Why do many companies find it difficult to institutionalize leadership?

Control freaks and micro managers who have difficulty delegating effectively are barriers to institutionalizing leadership. This often stems from a lack of trust such people have in human capacity to perform independently with minimal supervision.

Ego is another obstacle to consider. There are enough examples of people who love to shine in their own glory! A heightened sense of self-importance interrupts wisdom!

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Can people be great managers and great leaders, or are they typically different individuals?

Managers do things right, and leaders do the right things. This is a simple definition of both. People need to play both roles. They have capacity for both! However, some may be more oriented to being a manager (left-brain), while others may lean more towards leadership (right-brain).

Hence it's important to play on strengths of people and deploy them according to their capabilities.

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