

India-gazing

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The India Way — How India's Top Business Leaders Are Revolutionising Management (Peter Capelli et al) may well mark a strong beginning of an onslaught of tomes attempting to analyse how Indian entrepreneurs/business leaders manage their businesses, and then identifying and postulating traits which could provide new insights into and direction to managers across the world who may currently be struggling to keep their business growing strongly and profitably. The 80s had seen such eulogies for the Japanese way of management with Theory Z and Kaizen being just two of the “discoveries” at that time. With the Japanese economy seeing more downs than ups in the last 20 years or so, the attention of the academics and the almost “professional” inventors and authors of new business trends and philosophies shifted to China a few years ago. By now, there are thousands of management books analysing just about every facet of the Chinese juggernaut, with the more adventurous authors already extolling the virtues of “state-sponsored capitalism” as the way to go while junking the “free market” capitalism in the dustbin of history. With the Indian economy sustaining an average 7-8 per cent growth for almost 20 years, and with scores of Indian companies now boasting of an increasing global footprint and recognition, not to mention billions and tens of billions of dollar revenue balance sheets, it is but natural to see the attention of academics and others now getting more sharply focused on India.

The India Way is very clearly written for an international audience. For an Indian manager or an entrepreneur or an MBA student, the book at best may not have anything new to learn from, and at worst, may invite a dose of cynicism on some of the observations of the authors. Read, for instance, “the melding of business and national leadership is central to the Indian way of doing business. Many business leaders are deeply involved in societal issues... the melding goes well beyond private profits and public charity, with national purpose as much a part of the business mindset as financial results and reputational gain”. Somehow, this does not corroborate the fact that the Indian rich (and even corporate India) are not exactly known for their generosity when it comes to giving to charity.

Yes, there are some differences worth understanding about the way Indian managers have to manage their businesses — they do have tremendous ability to improvise and adapt (as the authors have stated), the successful ones have creative value proposition given the complexity of the Indian market (again, rightly identified by the authors). There is also a different way of managing human resources, though not by the majority — as the authors postulate. When it comes to broad mission and purpose, yes, Indian business leaders do place special emphasis on personal values, a vision of growth and strategic thinking. Where there could be disagreement with the authors is when they claim that Indian business leaders “stress broader societal purpose. The leaders of Indian business take pride in enterprise success but also in family prosperity (true), regional advancement (?), and national renaissance (???)...”. Indeed, the authors continue to belabour the “business with a social purpose” theme with a jarring regularity.

There are, of course, some interesting chapters, especially the one touching upon “improvisation and adaptability”, highlighting Indian managers’ willingness for trial and error, flexibility and resilience, and *jugaad* and adaptation. The one focusing on “delivering the creative value proposition” and identifying some distinctive traits of successful Indian companies that include a committed top tier, heightened willingness to take risks, some pushing decisions to front lines, using speed as a competitive advantage, and moving front and sideways at the same time are tactics and techniques which the more rigid, strait-jacketed firms in the West could take some learning from.

The authors have certainly put in a lot of effort in researching for the book. Indeed, of the 330-odd pages in the book, almost 150 comprise appendices, notes, bibliography and indices. Indeed, some of India’s best entrepreneurs and professional managers do find more than a mention in the book in some context or other. Some of them most certainly are worthy role models not only for other Indian managers and entrepreneurs but indeed for outside India too. However, it is also true that another new generation of entrepreneurs and managers is beginning to make its presence felt already in India. Some of them embody style and value-system that may be almost diametrically opposite to *The India Way* the authors have so painstakingly put together. Hence, as the authors embark upon the expected *The India Way* series of lectures and conferences, it may be worth their while to start thinking about working on a sequel.

arvind.singhal@technopak.com